

Sunday 19

This is quite a Gospel, is it not? I mean it is so challenging to our faith. Can we really believe that Jesus walked on water? Some of you may say: “Of course I can. He is one with God. He is God. He is the second person of the Blessed Trinity. Of course he can walk on water. Furthermore, those who study scripture tell us that his own response to his terrified disciples who think that they are seeing a ghost confirms our belief that he can walk on water. For what at first appears to be a simple sentence of identification (Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid) is in fact a claim to be God. In Exodus, ch. 3, God appears to Moses in a burning bush in the desert and tells him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses says to God: “If I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you, and they ask me, ‘What is his name? What do I tell them? God replied to Moses: I am who I am.’” And that, the scholars tells us, is what Jesus is here saying as well when he identifies himself to his terrified disciples. The simple phrase which we might take to mean, Hi, it’s me, is in fact the “I am” of the God of Moses. And since he is such, of course he can walk on water.

Even given this explanation, some of us still find it hard to believe that Jesus actually walked on water. We doubt. We are like Peter who, according to this account, had enough faith to step out of the boat onto the water but then lost faith when he saw how strong the wind was. He begins to sink into the waves, but Jesus reaches out to him immediately and grabs him and then says to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” The verb for doubt used here occurs only one other time in the NT, we are told. It is in this same Gospel of Matthew in its final chapter, 28, when the risen Jesus appears to his disciples in Galilee: “When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.”

Oh, thank God! Even among the disciples, even with Peter, even in the final appearance of the risen Lord to his disciples, there is doubt. That is a consolation for those of us who are also bothered by our doubts about Jesus’ walking on the water.

But could it be that those of us who have these doubts are missing the whole point of this story which is to teach us to have faith in God and the Lord Jesus in the difficult situations of our lives. In other words, the physical miracle of walking on the water is a metaphor for the difficulty of believing in the dire circumstances of our lives.

Like the disciples in the boat, we often fail to recognize Jesus when he appears in the fog of our lives. And given our more scientific approach to reality we are slow to recognize the real miracles that take place in our lives. We see the times when we avoided a catastrophe, or, better said, when a catastrophe which should have hit us missed us, as just good luck, as just an accident: “I just happened to be in the right place at the right time,” we say. Really? No, not really. The fact that we just happened to be there was more than just a happening. It was the Lord acting in our lives at that moment. But we didn’t recognize him. Now we can, and now, looking back, we can thank Him for saving us in that moment when we could have hurt ourselves, even permanently hurt ourselves.

Sometimes we begin to believe but then doubt overcomes us. This is what happened to Peter. Jesus has told him and the others that it is he who is approaching them on the waves, but Peter wants proof. He cries out to Jesus: “If it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus obliges him: “Come,” he says. And Peter comes. He steps out of the boat and begins to walk towards Jesus. But then the reality of the winds and the waves takes hold of him and he loses faith and begins to sink. But he still has enough faith to cry out, “Lord, save me.” Immediately Jesus stretches out his hand and

grabs hold of him and then says to him: “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Like Peter, we have faith, but it is weak. We are always looking for proof. That is, we doubt our own faith, for faith is not proof. But if there is just a little faith in us, enough to make us cry out to the Lord in desperation, “Save me,” Jesus will reach out his hand and grab hold of us and save us.

This miracle story is teaching us how to live our lives as lives of faith, believing that Jesus is present to us in the storms of our lives and asks us to step out of the boat of our comfort and security and walk to him upon the waters of faith, and even when the temptation comes to give up faith, to cry out to him in faith so that he will reach out his hand to us and grab hold of us and say to us: “Why do you doubt, why is your faith so weak? Have faith! It is I. It is me, Jesus. Don’t be afraid!”