

Matthew 14:22-33^{vii viii}

After he fed the people, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

^{vii} About the Gospel: Matthew 14:22-33

In today's reading, Jesus demonstrates his mastery over wind and sea (which, in the Old Testament, symbolized the powers of chaos and death) and is near to rescue the disciples when they desperately need help. He identifies himself by using the words, "It is I," which echo God's own self-description that became the proper name for God in the Old Testament (Exodus 3:14; Isaiah 43:10-13).

This story has many similarities to the narratives of the resurrection appearances; the disciples are afraid, they don't recognize Jesus, they take him for a ghost, and finally they are reassured by him. Matthew adds the story of Peter's attempt to imitate Jesus, illustrating the themes of discipleship and faith. Peter asks for and receives a share of Jesus' power, but when his attention is distracted he begins to give way. His doubt is neither a denial of faith, nor intellectual questioning, but a lack of sufficient trust, a personal vacillation in the face of confusion and danger. Especially in Matthew's time, the "boat" of the Church, "beaten by the waves" of hostility and persecution, needed reassurance that the Lord was always nearby.

Matthew emphasizes the emergence of Peter as both a representative of every disciple and as the leader and spokesman of the Twelve. The section falls into three parts, each of which ends with a story, specific to Matthew, about Peter: 13:54-14:33, Peter walking on the water; 14:34-16:20, Peter's confession; and 16:21-17:27, Peter paying the temple tax.

viii **Reflection and Response**

The story in today's gospel is almost a cultural artifact, a ready source of secular humor and storytelling. Dozens of jokes—hundreds of cartoons—rely on the memory of Jesus walking on the water for their punch.

Even we Christians may be unready, therefore, to take a serious look at the story. Surely it is just another gospel illustration of Jesus' divine power over creation? Need we look any deeper than that?

We can try. We can begin by putting to ourselves and to the story two questions. What is Jesus teaching us in this story about faith? What is Jesus asking us to do?

When we consider the role of faith in this story, the events become almost an enacted parable. We can recall a similar teaching about faith in the parable of the mulberry tree. When the disciples hint that Jesus has not yet given them enough faith to really get to work, Jesus replies crisply, "With faith as small as a seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Pull yourself up by the roots and plant yourself in the sea,' and it will be done!"

Did Jesus really expect his disciples to rearrange the Palestinian landscape? Does the Church remember the story of Peter in the hope of inspiring new methods of land and water transportation?

No, but the sheer impossibility of the tasks make them the right metaphors for the tasks we actually face. Paul confronted the enormity of one such task when he brooded on the separation already growing between his beloved Jewish people and his chosen Christian community.

We can hear his grief and pain as he declares that he would be willing even to be separated from Jesus forever if only his Jewish brothers and sisters would acknowledge Jesus as Messiah. Paul wrote this before the expulsion of the Christians from the synagogue—long before the bitter persecution of Jews by Christians began. We can only wonder at what he would write today, after centuries in which the chasm between Jews and Christians has grown mostly deeper.

That chasm, and ones wider and deeper, are ours to leap. We are called to be Christ in our world. Repenting our own sins, we are called to offer reconciliation to all people. Jesus asks us to feed the hungry, to liberate the oppressed, and to praise God with every breath.

The very grandeur of our calling can seem as overwhelming as a storm at sea. How do we keep our eyes on Jesus when our failures and trials obscure our sight? How often do we feel as if we cannot take the next step? We feel ourselves sinking, sinking in our self-doubt and despair.

Then it is that we hear Jesus call to us. Then it is that we feel his hand reach out to ours. Then it is that we know that the power to take one step more—and perhaps only one step more—is ours for the asking when we call on Jesus.