

Have courage! I am! Do not be afraid!

These were the words of the Lord Jesus to his disciples
When they were in darkness on the sea
Surrounded by chaos and instability
Held afloat in a boat tormented by the waves
With the wind against them

Have courage! I am! Do not be afraid!

These are the words of the Lord to his church today
To us: especially when we feel as if God has constrained us to go
Into a place in life where we would not choose to be
When we feel like we are going nowhere
Where we feel as if there is very little holding us afloat
Where the night has been long
And we are more disposed to see what threatens us
Rather than the one who brings us peace with God

Let's listen to today's Gospel reading
And pay attention to the details
And hear that our Lord Jesus is with his church
That he is with us as we live out our callings in life

Here's how the reading starts: **Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.**

First of all note the unusual way this is phrased
Jesus made the disciples get into the boat
He constrained them; he compelled them; he forced them
It is not where they wanted to be
It is not where they wanted to go: ahead of him: to *the other side*
This seems to have in Greek the same connotations that it does in English
He constrains his disciples to do this
While he dismisses the crowds

Dismissing the crowds: this is what his disciples had wanted Jesus to do
Before the feeding of the five thousand
But Jesus would not dismiss the crowds
Before he had looked up to heaven
Blessed and broken the loaves, and given them to the disciples

To give to the crowds

Only after he has fed them with the bread that he had blessed and broken
Does he dismiss the crowds to their vocations

It is natural, and I think right, for us as Christian people

To hear liturgical, sacramental overtones here

The service has ended, the people have been dismissed

The work of living in vocation has begun a new cycle

The text goes on: **And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.**

Note how the evangelist specifies that Jesus prayed *on a mountain*

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus first authoritatively teaches his disciples

On a mountain: the sermon on the mount. Matthew 5-7

He will commission them and institute baptism on a mount

In the Great Commission, Matthew 28

He also reveals his glory to Peter, James, and John on a mountain

The mount of transfiguration, Matthew 17

And here: when Jesus is on a mountain, but this time alone

He will go from the mountain, the place of revelation

Down to his disciples, to the sea, the place of instability and chaos

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 towards them on the [sea].

Let's pause here

I think as we listen to how the reading goes on

It's good for us to consider God's revelation in nature and in Scripture

When we hear about the sea and think about it as an aspect of nature

I think it's good for us to consider what it means existentially.

Have you ever spent a long time on a boat

And then stepped on to solid land: *terra firma*?

You literally feel the difference, and it stays with you

As you find your land legs: the sea is instability, strangeness. Not home.

This is how it is with the disciples: they are in the boat: the nave

The waves are tormenting the boat, the wind is against them

They know they are in an unstable, unsafe place

When we hear about the sea and think about it in Scriptural terms
I think it's good for us to consider what it means theologically
The sea is, in Genesis 1, what God calls the conglomeration of waters
It is the collection of the formless void out of which God drew order
Throughout the Scriptures the sea symbolises Chaos and death
Which is why in revelation 21:1 it can say that the sea will be no more

And Jesus came to his disciples walking on the sea
Treading underfoot the forces of chaos and disorder and death

Notice, by the way, that the Scriptures don't say *how* this happened
Like in last week's reading the text did not describe
How Jesus made five loaves and two fish feed so many
We should not be too surprised by this: it's part of our tradition
We confess, for example, that the bread which is taken and blessed and given
In communion is the true body of Christ
And that the wine is his true blood: but we do not say *how* this happens
We trust the words of Jesus, and we see how God calls us
Into the life of faith that not even the darkness of death can overwhelm

The reading goes on: **But when the disciples saw him walking on the [sea], they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear.**

We know that our circumstances can change our perceptions
And the disciples, in the darkness, on the water
Going to the 'other side' expect not to see Jesus
But that which threatens, that which is other: a phantasm; a ghost
They cry out in fear

But then we get to the heart of the reading:

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

'It is I' This, in Greek, is literally 'I am'.

It is the name of God revealed to Moses from the burning bush
The meaning of which is revealed to Moses as he is hidden
In the cleft of the rock

'I am', Gracious and merciful; slow to anger and abounding
In steadfast love

In the darkness on the sea, Jesus is present; he great I am is there
Speaking words with power to bring light out of darkness
And order out of chaos

Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.'

Or perhaps more literally, 'Lord, since you are, command me...'

Notice the change of vocabulary, from the sea to the water

That which, in the psalms, has power to overwhelm God's faithful

St Peter knows that Jesus' command has authority

That when Jesus speaks there is power even over that

Which could overwhelm us and drag us down

[Jesus] said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus.

Jesus' word has power; by the power of Jesus' word

St Peter walks on the water: he finds stability

And walks to Jesus, to the great I am,

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?'

As long as St Peter listened to Jesus' word

The waters could not drag him down

But in noticing the wind, he becomes frightened

[Jesus has talked about the wind before: at the end of the sermon on the mount

Both the wise and the foolish builders' homes face the wind and rain

But it is only the one who builds on the rock whose house stands

Keep this in mind as we head towards Matthew 16:

We will hear about this again]

Jesus does not abandon St Peter in his folly

St Peter who calls to the Lord, to the *I am* to save him

Is saved: as Scripture repeats

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Even those of little faith who doubt:

Notice again the question Jesus has for St Peter:

'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

When Jesus disciples ask him to increase their faith

Jesus draws their attention to what God can do

And away from the need for a great faith

So when we look to God, we should not be anxious about the size of our faith

But confident in what God can do

But it is also important for us to know that God looks to us for faith

As Jesus asks in the parable of the Unjust Judge: **'And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'** Luke 18

Indeed today's narrative does end not in doubt, but in faith
Listen: **When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'**

The disciples move from fear to worship
From thinking that Jesus was a phantasm, a ghost
To confessing who he is: the Son of God
What this means they will learn by being with him
Through his suffering and death, and into his resurrection
Through their own taking up of the cross in the life of discipleship

Dear Christian people
We should not be dismayed if we find ourselves, like the first disciples
Constrained to go where we do not want to go
If we find ourselves brought together into the church
So vulnerable, seemingly going nowhere in darkness
Tormented by forces that oppose here and her Lord
We should not be overcome with fear if in our own lives
It seems as if the forces of chaos or disorder or death
Will overwhelm us
Listen to the words of your Lord:
Take courage! I am! Do not be afraid!
Since our Lord is with us live out our callings in faith
Find mutual consolation as we encourage each other
And persevere in doing good
So that our Father in heaven may be glorified.
In Jesus' name. Amen.