

## 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

### GOSPEL

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Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he would send the crowds away. After sending the crowds away he went up into the hills by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, while the boat, by now far out on the lake, was battling with a heavy sea, for there was a head-wind. In the fourth watch of the night he went towards them, walking on the lake, and when the disciples saw him walking on the lake they were terrified. 'It is a ghost' they said, and cried out in fear. But at once Jesus called out to them, saying, 'Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid!' It was Peter who answered. 'Lord,' he said 'if it is you, tell me to come to you across the water.' 'Come' said Jesus. Then Peter got out of the boat and started walking towards Jesus across the water, but as soon as he felt the force of the wind, he took fright and began to sink. 'Lord! Save me!' he cried. Jesus put out his hand at once and held him. 'Man of little faith,' he said 'why did you doubt?' And as they got into the boat the wind dropped. The men in the boat bowed down before him and said, 'Truly, you are the Son of God.'

(Matthew 14:22-33)

### DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- For the Hebrew people, the waters of the sea are a symbol of the chaos from which creation sprang. Never having been a seafaring people, they were fearful of the watery deep.
- Even today, storms can blow up on the Sea of Galilee very quickly and make it dangerous for boats out on the lake.
- In art, the Church is often represented as a boat. A boat carries its passengers through threatening waters but is not exempt from the turbulence of storms. The Church can bear us through the storms of life, but it does not exempt us from the stresses and struggles.

### EXPLORING THE WORD

A little-noticed phrase in this text adds significantly to the way we understand this story. Jesus told the disciples to cross to the other side of the lake. In doing this, they were heading away from the Jewish region and into Gentile territory. The boat is a symbol of the Church, and as such, we can detect in this text a reflection of the situation of Matthew's community, who have been forced out of the synagogue and away from traditional Judaism. More and more, it is Gentiles who are coming to belief in Jesus. This is causing fear and concern for some in the community.

Matthew gives a prominent place to Peter, whose actions do not make sense, except as a combination of impulsive love and faith weakened by doubt. While his full attention is on Jesus, Peter is fine, but as soon as he allows what is going on around him to distract him from Jesus, he begins to sink.

This text offers a parable of the Church besieged and being tossed about. Peter's response is to be bold and to step out into the unknown, yet he is vulnerable. The great comfort is in the risen Lord stretching out his hand to restore morale. This manifestation of the power of Christ is greeted by that great acclamation of faith: 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

- Discuss the things that can be a distraction on the journey to faith.
- Are there aspects of the Church or its beliefs that cause participants to doubt? Allow time for questions to arise and fears to be allayed.

### MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What storms have you experienced in your life that have caused fear or confusion?
- What doubts and fears make you waver in your journey to Christ?
- How do you experience the calming action of Jesus?
- Describe to others in the group a period in your life when you felt you were 'going under'. What or who was it that kept you afloat?
- Try to calm the fears of others this week in your family or workplace.
- Once again we see Jesus withdrawing alone to pray. The example of Jesus in quiet prayer can be a pointer to us in how to pray. As a Church, we pray communally, but quiet reflection is also important. Take time this week to reflect alone. The disciples cry out to Jesus in their distress, *Lord, save me*. This week, allow yourself to hear Jesus' answer: *Courage! Do not be afraid*.

## SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

The special role that Peter played in the core group of twelve disciples is well accepted. He is listed first among them, is often their spokesperson and is clearly prominent in the original Jerusalem community. Tradition holds that Peter went to Rome and led the Christian community there. The Catholic Church accepts that the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, is the successor of Peter. What is important is the way Peter is portrayed: as a fisherman, fishing for souls (Luke 5:10); as the shepherd of the sheep of Christ (John 21:15-17); as an elder who addresses elders (1 Peter 5:1); as a receiver of special revelation (Acts 1:9-16); as one who can correct doctrinal misunderstanding (2 Peter 3:15-16); and as the rock on which the Church is built (Matthew 16:18). Pope Francis is the 266th successor of Peter.

- Discuss the process for electing a pope and some aspects of the papacy through history.
- Introduce the biographical background of the current Pope and his career within the Church.
- Find out what the group has heard via the media about Pope Francis. How do the media characterise Francis? What are his concerns?
- What 'storms' assail the Church today? Be broad in your responses here.

## SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

Just as God's word at creation drew order out of the watery chaos, so does the word of Jesus calm the storm. He has the mastery of the Creator over the elements of nature. Peter, on the other hand, symbolises our impetuous humanity, leaping out into the unknown and then becoming afraid and failing. But help is available in the person of Jesus, who truly is the Son of God.

## LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- Are there things that give rise to fear and uncertainty in your local community? How can these fears be stilled?
- What are the ways your community publicly professes its faith? Are there contributions catechumens can make in this?
- A large bowl of water with floating candles could form the focus of prayer. With quiet music playing, invite participants to reflect on the storms and troubles that sometimes toss them about. Pray for the Church and those who lead it. A prayer to say together could be:

*Lord, when the winds are contrary and the seas rough,  
when darkest night assails us, may your cry reach us:  
Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.*

A suitable song may be 'Be not afraid' (GA 449). Conclude with the prayer of exorcism in the RCIA at §94B.

## NOTES