

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today's Gospel follows immediately after last Sunday's. Recall, Jesus had just fed thousands of people with 5 loaves and 2 fish.

As I preached last Sunday, the disciples realized it was a miracle. We know especially because they later wrote about it. But they may not have understood its implications right away. Why not? Well, one clue is that they did not bow down right away and worship the One who demonstrated such power over the created elements. A second clue comes from Mark's gospel, in the parallel account to today's Gospel from Matthew. According to Mark's telling of Jesus walking on the water, when Jesus and Peter "*got into the boat with [the other disciples], and the wind ceased,*" the disciples "*were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves*" (Mark 6:51-52). They would come to understand, as I said — just not yet.

Therefore, Jesus had some more teaching to do, which He did in our Gospel today. So, immediately, Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and head to the other side of the sea. He would dismiss the crowd; and He would go up on the mountain to pray. Remember, Jesus was fully human, and in His grief at John the Baptist's death, He needed to pray. May that be a lesson to us to call on the Lord as we grieve or go through the tribulations of life.

By the time Jesus had finished praying, it was evening, and the disciples had been making slow progress across the sea, for they had been rowing against a strong headwind. Still, they were a long way from shore by the time Jesus arrived at the shore of the sea. Now, like we do, Jesus knew that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Therefore, Jesus decided to cross the sea on foot, walking across the water. What a sight that must have been! He, who had "*walked in the recesses of the deep*" at its creating, decided this time to walk on the sea's surface.

Jesus caught up with the disciples quickly. He could have given them a wide berth, for Mark says that "*He meant to pass by them,*" but He didn't. Maybe the Compassionate One wanted to check up on them; I don't know. Anyway, the disciples saw Him walking on the sea. In fact, Jesus must have come close enough that the disciples could hear Him speak to them over the roar of the wind and the wave.

The disciples saw Jesus, but they didn't recognize Him. "*It's a ghost,*" they cried out in terror. Jesus didn't delay. Immediately, the Gospel says, Jesus spoke to them in comforting words: "*Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.*"

As what would become Peter's habit, he spoke up right away, addressing Jesus as "*Lord.*" Jesus hadn't identified Himself except to say, "*It is I,*" yet Peter seemed to know who "I" was, though he had formerly thought He was a ghost. Did Peter recognize Him? Or His voice? Or His manner of speaking? Likely not. Maybe he was just being hopeful, for Peter answered Jesus with a bit of skepticism: "*Lord, if it is you*"

Moreover, just to make sure, Peter put Jesus to the test: "*command me to come to you on the water.*" Peter had seen what Jesus could do, the many wonders He had performed. If that really was Jesus, He should be able to let Peter also walk on water. No problem. "*Come,*" Jesus said. And Peter stepped out of the boat.

Everything seemed fine, at first. Peter was on the water walking toward Jesus, but then his eyes were diverted by the wind. Perhaps you can understand how that might happen, having just seen again the destructive power of wind and wave in hurricane Isaias. But that diversion changed Peter's focus off Jesus and onto himself. Blown off course by the wind, he began to sink. "*Lord, save me,*" Peter cried out in desperation.

Was that a prayer to Jesus whom Peter recognized as Lord, or to the Father above, who had saved Israel as they passed through the Red Sea waters? I think it was probably Jesus, but it doesn't ultimately matter. Jesus is the Father's agent in the world. Jesus is the One who came down from heaven and became incarnate. Jesus is the One who would save the world by His cross. Jesus is the One whom "*God raised ... from the dead.*" Jesus is the One who saves. Jesus was there, and Jesus reached out His hand immediately and "*took hold of*" Peter as he sank. Jesus saves, as Paul preached, "*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*"

This calling on the Lord is connected up with believing, St. Paul continues. "*How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?*" We answer Paul's question, saying, "They cannot!" Jesus is there to save those who call on Him in faith, even when at times, like Peter, the faith is small, even in the midst of doubts. And, indeed, we all struggle with doubts. But doubt is not evidence of the absence of faith; it's evidence of faith itself, though perhaps a faith that is experiencing trial. Therefore, hear again the promise to the faithful: "*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*" And "*if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*"

The doubts along with the terror departed from Peter and the rest of the disciples as Jesus did one more thing. As He climbed onto the boat with Peter, He caused the wind to cease. The disciples had seen enough. What they didn't

immediately grasp after the feeding miracle, they now got: *“truly you [Jesus] are the Son of God.”* And they worshipped Him.

That doesn't mean that fear and doubt wouldn't return. It would; it did. Fear gripped the disciples again as Jesus was arrested. Fear would grip Peter in the courtyard of the high priest leading to denial. Fear gripped the disciples in the three days following Jesus' death as they huddled in the locked room. And, yes, fear and doubt would fill the disciples as the resurrected Jesus appeared to them in that locked room, and again they thought they saw a ghost (though it is a different word used).

But Jesus came to calm their fears then as He did in our account today. They were different words. Today, it was *“Take heart; it is I. [εγώ εἰμι] Do not be afraid.”* At the resurrection it was *“Peace be with you.”* And *“Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself [εγώ εἰμι αὐτός]. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have”* (Luke 24:36, 38-9). Today, in the Gospel Jesus reached out His hand and took hold of Peter to pull him from the water. At the resurrection, Jesus reached out His wounded hands and took hold of the disciples to pull them from the depths of their doubt and fear.

This is what Jesus does still today as He did for James Daniel. Today James Daniel, too young to think that he might walk to Jesus on the water, was nevertheless pulled out of water and the death of sin that awaits those born of Adam and was taken up into the arms of Jesus. James Daniel was rescued by Jesus and put into the holy Ark of Christendom, there safe with Him who calms wind and wave. That doesn't mean that fear will not grip him in the future nor doubts. Like Jesus' disciples and us disciples, James will need to be instructed further of Jesus, incarnate, crucified, risen Lord, of Moses and the commandments, of a righteousness that depends on faith, of a faith that comes by hearing Christ's word, a word delivered by preaching and pouring, eating and drinking. He will need to be taught to worship the Triune God in whose name he has been baptized: the Father, and Jesus, God's Son, and the Holy Spirit, and to call upon the name of the Lord. He will need to be taught to trust even in the midst of fears and doubts, trust in Jesus who is there for us all, who saves us all *“out of all [our] troubles”* (Ps. 34:6).

Lord, keep us ever mindful of this Jesus and lead us to worship Him as Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.