

12-08-2023. 19th Sunday through the year. 1 Kings 19:9a.11-13a, Mt. 14:22-33.

Peter van Dael SJ

WALKING ON WATER

The raging of the sea

The Bible is a book about God and people. It is not a theological textbook, but largely a storybook. The same is true of today's gospel. It is a picture story, a narrative in which images are used, referring to other realities. The waters of the lake on which Jesus' disciples were sailing, the headwinds they faced and the waves that ravaged the boat, all refer to the primordial flood, to chaos, danger and destruction. In a psalm, the raging of the sea is identified with the turmoil of angry nations (Ps. 65:8). This could mean anything, up to and including the war in Ukraine.

It is thou that dost calm the tumuli of its waves

Jesus walking on the water and calming the wind reminds us of God, who is addressed in a psalm in the following way: It is thou that dost curb the pride of the sea and calm the tumult of its waves (Ps. 89:10).

In the tumult of the waves, the disciples in the boat hear Jesus say, Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid. Jesus conjures their fear by referring to the name of God I am the God who IS (Ex. 3:14), I will be with thee (Ex. 3:12). We can also think of what Isaiah has God say: Have no fear, I am with thee; do not hesitate, am I not thy God? (Isa. 41:10). In Jesus, God is near his people.

Peter

Peter represents the disciples in the boat. He says: Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. Jesus then invites Peter: Come! We read how Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened, and began to sink. Peter was called to walk on the water like Jesus, to rule the high rising sea like God Himself. As long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, he could hold his own, but as soon as he heard the wind and saw the waves, he became afraid. He panicked and sank into the water. Faith and lack of confidence go hand in hand here. Also elsewhere in the Gospel, Peter appears to have two sides. Jesus calls him rock (Mt. 16:18), but shortly thereafter Satan, a stone in my path, because he thinks not of what God wants, but only of what people want (Mt. 16:23). Later Peter is firm when he follows Jesus into the palace of the high priest (Mt. 26:58), but soon he is so cowardly that he says three times that he does not know Jesus (Mt. 26:70-74). But repentance and forgiveness have the last word. Peter, who had denied Jesus three times, was given later the opportunity to profess three times his surrender to the risen Christ, when he appeared to the disciples by the Lake of Tiberias (Jn. 21:15-17). Back to Peter who was overcome with fear when he felt the wind and saw the waves. Peter doubted not the Lord's power, but himself. His fear overcame his faith and he began to sink and cried out: Lord, save me!. Jesus stretched out his hand and grabbed him.

God's saving hand

The gesture of the outstretched and saving hand is a Biblical image applied to Jesus. We read about God's saving hand in the psalms: Then he reached down from heaven, caught hold of

me, rescued me from that flood (18:17), Stretch down your hand from above, save me, rescue me from deep waters (144:7).

We also find the gesture of God's saving hand in the prophet Isaiah. He lets God speak: Have no fear, I am with thee; do not hesitate, am I not thy God?... It is I, the Lord thy God, that hold thee by the hand and whisper to thee, Do not be afraid, I am here to help thee (Isa. 41:10,13-12).

The nave of the church

When Matthew wrote down the story of the disciples in the boat, he was thinking of the ship of the church, the first congregation, threatened and persecuted. It is not difficult for us to apply this image of the boat in the churning sea to the church today. The church is in danger: numerically it is shrinking, at least in our regions. What the church has to say is drowned out by the tumult of advertising, which pushes us towards ever more consumption. Lately the Church has been weighed down by its own past of committed and repressed abuse of children, women and men. There is more to list.

When we allow ourselves to be paralyzed by all this, we drown. But when the eye is focused on Jesus as the icon of God, we are saved. When we are inspired by the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God, God's new world, when we continue to pray in the Lord's Prayer, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we are energized.

The gospel is also about us. We are afraid and worried about all kinds of things. But Jesus' call to Peter: come! is also addressed to us. When we keep our eyes on Jesus, we too can walk on the water. And when we sink on the sight of the raging waves, we too, like Peter, can cry out, Lord, save me! And then we are immediately grasped by a saving hand. The Gospel reading calls us to listen to the words do not be afraid! from the mouth of Jesus, to trust that a helping hand is offered to us as well. Our liturgical gathering, our personal prayer, but also the vision of God's new world of justice and peace, and the encounter with God in mutual service can give us an anchor to cope with life with its uncertainties and threats.