

19th Sunday (A)

13th August 2023

'O still, small voice of calm'

1K 19: *the sound of a gentle breeze ...* Ps 84: *a voice that speaks of peace*

Rom 9: ...

Mt 14: 22–33: Peter walks on the water with Christ

What is the most surprising thing about this account of Jesus and His disciples on the Sea of Galilee? Is it that Jesus walks on the water? Well, although this is a great surprise for the disciples out that night on the lake, to walk on the water is actually no great feat for the Son of God. “Through Him all things were made,” we say each Sunday in the Creed. God Almighty, through His Word, God the Son, made all things to be. Is it any wonder that He who created all things can defy the elements? He who is “Lord of sea and sky,” He can walk on the water, still the waves, calm the wind.

It's rather more surprising that *Peter* walks on the water. Almighty God can do all things, but He also wants us by faith in Him to do extraordinary things. Think of the martyrs who have gone to their death so as not to deny Jesus; the great works of charity which can be achieved by a person inspired by faith and love (think of the founders

of religious orders etc., and of others who put their lives utterly at the service of others *); ...

[* e.g. I have been reading recently about the British man, John Bradburne, martyred in 1979 and whose cause for canonization is open — he gave his life for the lepers in a medical mission in Zimbabwe, choosing to stay with them to care for them long after it was deemed safe to do so, during the civil war.] ... Or think too of the day-to-day life of the Christian trying to live a holy and moral life against the pressures of society at large. When we do what God calls us to — just as Jesus called to Peter — we *can* ‘walk on water,’ doing things unexpectedly great.

But perhaps the most surprising thing is not that Jesus can walk on water, nor that He can command Peter to walk on the water, but that when Peter fails, Jesus's hand is there. Jesus, the Son of God, wants to stretch out His hand to save this individual man, Peter, *even in the moment of His disbelief*. The amazing thing, then, is not that God can do great things, but that the all-powerful God will do the smallest things. There is a saying of St Thomas Aquinas

— I recall Pope Benedict writing of it, and Pope Francis has also quoted it in his homilies — that goes like this: *non coerceri a maximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum est* (“not to be confined by the greatest, yet to be contained within the smallest, is divine”). In other words, yes, it is utterly divine to allow Himself to be ‘reduced,’ humbled, become small, rather than to cling on doggedly to His Almighty power and majesty. Perhaps man is reluctant to believe that Almighty God will stoop to the minimum. We are reluctant to believe we are loved like this. Much of mankind is happier to disbelieve in God at all, than to accept that the fundamental power in the universe is so loving to each individual person. Because once we believe that God does love us like this, personally, in the small, everyday ways ... putting out His hand to catch us when we fall, raising us up in our doubts and in our failings ... then we have to change, we have to respond, we have to make sacrifices to return this love. We have then to turn to Him, in all His gentleness and say, as the apostles in that boat did: *Truly You are the Son of God!*

For it is not the power of God which is so impressive, but His personal touch, and His peace. Elijah knew the same in the cave on the mountain: God did not speak to Him in the gale, or the fire, or the earthquake, but in the gentle breeze. That God comes to us with a gentle touch — this is what makes us listen. *I will hear what the Lord God has to say — a voice that speaks of peace.* It is that same principle again, that what is impressive about God — what impresses us most, and convinces us most — is His attention to the ‘minimum’ things, the little things, the *contineri a minimo* of Aquinas’s maxim: His speaking to us not in earthquake or thunder but in the gentle breeze, calling us to Himself in the quietest voice.

A week ago I was at the closing Mass of World Youth Day, in the heat of a Portuguese morning (33°C or so) along with 1.5 million others who had slept out under the stars the night before. If I were asked what, of all the noisy, joyful, crazy youthfulness of WYD, I found most powerful and moving ... well, it has to be the *silence* of the Adoration time at the Saturday night prayer Vigil.

Through the week there were countless words, songs, testimonies, singing, chanting, boisterous jubilation, homilies, hymns ... but at the end of the day it was — for me and perhaps for many — the wordless silence of 1.5 million praying before the Blessed Sacrament exposed on an altar some 1 mile away, in the far distance from Sector C08. And it was quiet, utterly quiet, not a word, not a murmur, thousands upon thousands, kneeling in silent Adoration of Jesus. Maybe you wouldn't think that 1.5 million could be silent all together, but, I tell you, they were! At least, from where I was kneeling, I heard not a sound, for some 10 mins or more.

We have to find the quiet, and Jesus offers it to us. We have to find the quiet — I think that it is essential for a life of faith, prayer, and happiness. We cannot get through life all bustle, rush and noisiness, not happily. We need the quiet in order properly to pray and hear the voice of the Spirit's promptings. Are you getting enough quiet in your life? Are you making sure you find a daily time for real quiet, undistracted, prayerful time to simply be with the

Lord? If you notice, at the start of today's Gospel passage — long before he has brought peace and calm to the disciples in the boat in the distressing storm — He Himself has been at prayer; He has shaken off the crowds for a bit, gone out into the hills alone and communed with the Father. He shows that relationship with the Father *is* prayer; He models that relationship, and in His sacred humanity He shows that it can only be achieved by taking time out, precious time, a deliberate sacrificing of time for quiet and prayer. Are we making that time, every day? We absolutely must; it's as essential as eating and exercising and sleeping! Let's think about it! Are we truly making that commitment to quiet and prayer? Really, deliberately?

Jesus brings unfailingly a saving calm and dispelling of fear to Peter and the apostles when they finally appeal to Him; He can bring us peace and calm in the storms, the worries, the incessant concerns, but only if we're prepared to call on Him. If we offer Him that gift of quiet contemplation, He will offer us that greater, deeper, quiet of a contented heart. He does care; personally,

individually, the small and everyday things of our little life; He does want to calm the storms. Let's give Him the quiet and space to do so:

*I will hear what the Lord God has to say
A voice that speaks of peace
Peace for His people and His friends
And those who turn to Him in their hearts.
His help is near for those who fear Him
And His glory will dwell in our land.*

Ps 84 (85): 9–10