

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We reflect on the Gospel text for today from Mark 4.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, sanctify us in you truth, your word is truth. Amen

I am not much of a sailor. In fact I can barely row a kayak on a peaceful lake without fearing that I may plunge into the water like an axe that's come off its handle. Yes, I am not a good swimmer either. What to say then if I were the one facing such a violent storm as the one described in today's Gospel lesson? No way Jose! That's no place for a sitting duck like me.

I can't help but recollecting the sayings 'there are no atheists in foxholes', 'there are no atheists in hell' or that which applies directly to this text 'there are no atheists in the sea'. Their point is that in times of extreme distress and fear and when death is imminent there's nothing left other than hoping that a higher power may come to the rescue.

When disaster is imminent all deductive reasoning and logical thinking goes down the drain and you are left with a four-letter word: HELP!

HELP is all one needs when he or she realise their insufficiency and dependence and it doesn't matter how it's going to happen or who's going to pay the price as long as it gets him or her out of that. HELP was what Jesus' disciples were crying out for when then said: Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?

According to Mark, Jesus had been by the sea teaching in parables like that of the sower, of the growing seed and of the mustard seed. All of which point to the sole operation of God in the process of salvation. He had spent the day explaining that he is the sower who works the soil until it's good enough for that tiny seed to grow and become the most exuberant of the garden plants to the point of producing much fruit and nesting all sorts of birds. Jesus scatters the seed of the kingdom of God and like any sower he rests at night knowing God that will give the growth and eventually the fruit – which in this case is faith.

Interestingly, Jesus actually goes to sleep in the stern, as the boat crosses the Sea of Galilee, with the faith that the growth will be provided. But notice this. The stern area has traditionally been the location near the steering apparatus and by extension the domain of the ship's captain – and that's a role Jesus never gave up. Jesus, the captain, was aware of how the little boat would fare and what sort of weather the disciples would come across. He knows that in conditions of life and death or prolonged agony, the endurance of one's faith is tested to the extreme. We also know that from our own experiences in life.

However, talking about God's manner of action, He does not send us suffering or difficulty in order to find out whether our faith is strong enough to stand the test. He knows that our own faith is null. Otherwise, Jesus wouldn't have said in Luke 17:6 *If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.* In fact, God does not send us suffering and difficulty at all. It is the sin in the world (not always our own but also of others) that subjects us to the afflictions we experience in this world. We live in a world that produces and endures the consequences of sin. Take pollution as an example. We all produce it to a lesser or a greater degree) but we all suffer the sheer consequences of it. Collectively, we bring it upon

ourselves and others and God will allow it to happen. Some call adversities the consequences of our free will. But we may call them the results of the bondage of this world to sin and disciplinary instruments of God to waken our faith. And the faith God wants to produce is one that relies on him, not in us.

Now, the hostile winds and the tempestuous waves breaking against the little boat typify quite well the sort of struggles when a family breaks, when illness strikes, when the heart breaks, when children seem hard to raise, when parents seem hard to understand, when the stock exchange brakes, when the car brakes in the middle of nowhere, when war breaks, when a congregation breaks apart, or when, for whatever reasons, the world makes no sense anymore and nothing seems worthwhile.

No matter how hard one may try we are never able to find the level of security and happiness we would like to have. Whatever the misfortunes, they are the results of darkened minds (Job 38:2) like ours that are bound to a sinful nature. We have been conceived in sin and have inherited a sinful nature that condemns us because of all the wrong that it leads us to do. There's no escape there.

As the storm escalates and the boat is about to sink, the exhausted and hopeless disciples go to where the captain is. Teacher, they say, do you not care that we are perishing? The text says that Jesus was stirred up completely by the disciple's plea. His answer comes in the hushing of the wind and the restraining of the sea, almost as if Jesus was taming a wild animal and restraining it with a muzzle.

What followed was a great calm. And now (only now) comes the greatest miracle described in this passage. In awe before Jesus and puzzled by his questions 'Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?' they feared a great fear and said to one another 'who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

Now, you may think. What are you saying? They no longer feared the storm because Jesus had sorted that out but now they feel an even greater fear as they stare at Jesus – and that's supposed to be the big miracle in the story?

The disciples feared a great fear, but this is not the kind of fear we usually understand fear to be. This one is grounded in the Old Testament's understanding which says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom. This fear is best translated as astonishment, admiration and reverence. It acknowledges the wisdom that comes from God's instruction, which gives us the understanding of God himself. We commonly call this fear faith and faith comes from hearing the word of God – and they heard him!

I am not saying that the disciples weren't still gasping after all they had seen. I would! But this wasn't a senseless fear. They had learned from this, like Elijah did, that the voice of the Lord isn't in the strong wind or the violent waves but in the lull that followed where they could hear him whispering: Why are you so afraid?

Faith is the knowledge and the understanding of God's faithfulness to his promise to deliver us from trouble, to redeem us from our sins and to uphold us now and unto life everlasting. Faith does not search within. It looks outside of us, to God's warm affection for us despite our wicked nature. It recognizes our insufficiencies. It looks beyond the storms around us and seeks for Jesus to hush our troubled souls, quiet our anxious hearts and help us cope with our struggles.

Faith is the greatest miracle in this story because it isn't natural to us, rebellion is. We shouldn't be impressed by the stilling of the storm. God created the whole universe and upholds it. That tells us enough about his power and might.

What we should be impressed by is the way our Almighty God cares for us in his mercy and that's the point he wants to impress. That he is God who joins us in our flesh, suffers WITH us and dies FOR us. That's the faith he wants us to have. But this isn't a faith we begin. The Holy Spirit pours it in our hearts and it looks for Christ, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

Our Lord uses what we call disasters or throwbacks in life to tow us back to him. The prayerful cry of the afflicted stirs up God's deliverance. It may not come always the way we expect it to come. But it always comes the way we need it. And that's the way which God knows is best for us.

When we are full of ourselves we don't need God but when we find ourselves impotent before the storms of this life the Lord provides and exalts us in our hope for the eternal life Christ has already given us. That's because the Lord is steadfast and loving towards his redeemed. He never withdraws that love and HELP he once gave to us in Baptism. On the contrary, he keeps us through the ups and downs of this life for his name sake. Because he promised to do so and he honours his promises. As king David sang in today's Psalm of deliverance: Our HELP is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth. Our HELP is in God's faithfulness, particularly in Christ our savior and redeemer.

Amen

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen