

ALONE AGAIN!

A reflection by Marc Caissy
on the readings for Sunday, Aug. 13, 2017 (19 O.T., year A)
1 Kings 19:9-13; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14: 22-33

Consequences matter, look before you leap. Sometimes, it seems we spent half our time hammering that lesson into our kids' heads. Most of them ignored us. But if you heeded that caution, if you still look before you leap, today's gospel story is confounding.

The day had been typical enough. Sunny weather, huge crowds, lots of people healed, and then, more than 5000 fed. The disciples needed answers to countless questions and expected private time with the Master. However, Jesus' cousin, John, had just been beheaded. Jesus needed to "loose" the crowds, who saw in him the messiah who could heal, feed, and rule them as king (John 6). Jesus dismissed them to have some alone time with God and grieve. He then insists the disciples row ten km to the western shore of the lake without him. Despite a dreadful sense of his absence, they leave by themselves.

To use the archetypical cliché we love to sneer at, "It was a dark and stormy night"... And it got more so as the night deepened. Winds whipped the waves up and, bereft of even moonlight, the disciples rowed for their lives, without Jesus. They surely recalled encountering a perfect storm with Jesus asleep at the stern (Mt 8). Would they survive this one alone?

Drowning was a frightful way to die in Matthew's world. The sea concealed evil spirits and ghosts ready to seize any prey sinking to the bottom. When the disciples saw a misty figure walking toward them on the waves, they were scared silly, howling, "It's a ghost!" Translated in today's words, the "ghost" replied, "Hey guys, it's me, relax". What or who was it? Friend or fiend?

Peter, the practical "ghostbuster", chooses to look before leaping. "Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you on the water." "Come", replies Jesus. Peter must now, literally and spiritually, take a leap of faith into total surrender. His senses tell him he's doing something impossible. When fear distracts him from Jesus, Peter begins to sink and yells, "Lord, save me!" The Master catches Peter, speaking the words that make us all cringe, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Earlier in the day, the disciples didn't understand about the fish and loaves. Now, they're wondering about what this amazing rescue might mean. Many years later, the budding Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem had serious doubts about its survival. Matthew's goal was to establish Jesus' identity as divine, as Lord and Saviour. Without Jesus, the frenzied forces of evil would have overwhelmed the emerging Christian community. That's why Matthew records the disciples' words of worship, "Truly, you are the Son of God." Only a leap of faith in a divine Jesus actually being there to save them from imminent danger would enable Matthew's new Christians to weather the storms ahead.

On the other hand, how can we not sympathize with Peter. At a word from Jesus, he leaped out on ten-foot high waves. Even though fear overtook him, he did take that first step, one more than most would take in the same situation. What did Jesus expect, anyway? Was Peter to put his life at risk without fear, without doubts? Are we? Faith today, when held up against reasoning, rationale and reality, is associated with naiveté, gullibility and ignorance. We've learned to be practical people. We take risks, sometimes. We hope for good things, even miracles, sometimes, but they are cautious hopes, hopes that look before leaping.

In a world reeling from floods, fire and famines, add lives filled with personal tragedies, from sex abuse to elder neglect, from crippling diseases to lethal addictions. Confronted with such pain and devastation, and, YES, even small heartbreaks such as a vandalized veggie garden, Scripture spells out what Christians need at life's crossroads: a faith that leaves common sense behind, that clings to the Kingdom among and within us, a "faith of the heart!"ⁱ

However, Scripture cautions us. God doesn't always speak in dramatic circumstances. In the 1st Reading, Elijah expected God's presence in extreme weather events. The Lord spoke in sheer silence. Can we recognize

ⁱ From the theme music of "Star Trek: Enterprise", 2001

Jesus from our own projected “ghosts”? Can we recognize him here and now, in this Eucharist, as he quietly continues to feed and save us and the souls of multitudes?

The 2nd Reading has St. Paul claiming “the covenants, promises and the Christ” for his kindred. He could’ve added the prophets, such as Isaiah. In his time, he comforted the Chosen People. Now he reassures the entire Church, and each one of us, when we feel left alone, paralyzed by life’s soul-battering storms:

“When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you;
when you cross raging rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
though you walk through fire, the flames will not consume you.” (Is. 43)

“Be not afraid: I go before you, ALWAYS.”
(«Be Not Afraid», hymn, 1997)