

## Courage! Come! A call for distancing and depth

### Nineteenth Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – August 9, 2020

1 Kings 19:9,11-13; Rom 9:1-5; Mt 14:22-33

*“Courage! It is I! ..... Come!”* (Mt 14:27,29)

Prologue: Two disciples—Elijah and Peter—have an encounter with God in two different ways. Elijah meets the Lord in “a still small voice” or “sound of sheer silence” while Peter does so in the miracle of Jesus walking on the water. These encounters and miracles should not be interpreted as ‘*proofs*’ which the authors of Scripture desire to give their readers to order to coerce them to believe in God; rather, they should be seen as ‘*signs*’ and recognized in their symbolic power to strengthen the faith of the believing community. They can also be interpreted as divine calls for ‘distancing’ from the daily difficulties of life in order to get near to God, as well as to attain depth. Let’s see how....

### Three Signposts from Scripture:

1. Prophet Elijah—like all the prophets in the Bible—has a tough time with kings, false prophets and godless priests. During the reign of King Ahab (869–850 BC), idolatry became rampant in Israel since Ahab had married a pagan queen, Jezebel, who set up a temple to Baal in Samaria and had 400 priests serving her cult. Elijah exhibits God’s power and defeats the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:16-40) and becomes Jezebel’s sworn enemy. With his life threatened, Elijah is on the run, to escape the queen’s wrath. He is directed to “go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord”—the mountain referred to being Mount Horeb, where Moses had encountered and communed with God earlier. Elijah finds shelter in a cave. In the First Testament, traditional theophanies (i.e., divine revelations) associated with Moses are experienced and expressed in noisy terms: thunder, lightning, fire and earthquakes. By sharp contrast, Elijah encounters God neither in the mighty wind nor in the earthquake and fire but “in a still small voice” or the “sound of sheer silence” that made him wrap his face with his mantle and go to the entrance of the cave to meet God. Elijah’s distancing of himself from his fears of the queen and his fiery prophetic activity results in a God-encounter and experience which is totally unexpected.
2. The gospel scene begins with Jesus distancing himself physically both, from the crowds as well as from his disciples. Earlier, the disciples had advised Jesus to dismiss the crowds so that they could go to buy food in order to feed themselves. However, Jesus dismisses the crowd only *after* he has fed them. Then, he ascends the mountain—a symbol of closeness to God—in order to pray and to be re-energized by his *Abba*: Father. When he is atop the mountain and closest to God in prayerful intimacy, he is geographically furthest away from the lake where his disciples are battling tempestuous winds and waves. The disciples, symbolically in the “boat of the church,” are experiencing tumult, resistance and danger. In the First Testament Yahweh is the one in control “who trampled the ways of the seas” (Job 9:8; 38:16; Ps 77:19; Sir 24:5). Now, in their dire need, Jesus comes to them like Yahweh striding over the waters: “Early in the morning ...” at a time when God rescued the people of Israel by parting and then closing the waters of the Red Sea, Jesus comes to rescue of his disciples. But, on account of their fragile faith think they are seeing a ghost!

3. Jesus' comforting "Take heart, *it is I*; do not be afraid" (v.27) reassurance echoes God's 'ego eimi' (Ex 3:14) identification of Godself. In his gospel, Matthew makes two additions to the parallel narrative in Mark's gospel, namely (a) there is a dialogue between Peter and Jesus, and Peter is seen walking on the water, and (b) instead of ending with the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus, today's gospel climaxes with a confession of faith: "Truly, you are the Son of God!" Both these additions are significant; for, according to Matthew, Peter is not just a disciple, but the disciple *numero uno* who will captain and steer the 'bark of Christ'. Note that the Peter of Matthew's gospel is often portrayed as the spokesman and leader of the band of disciples (see 16:16,22; 18:21, etc.). Here too, Peter is the bold one who begins to walk on the water until he shifts his focus and consciousness of Jesus onto the strong winds and waves. Jesus responds to Peter's "Lord, save me!" (v.30) cry by stretching out his hand—as God often does—to save him. Jesus' gentle rebuke: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (v.31) is directed to all disciples whose lives oscillate between faith and doubt (Mt 28:17). This whole episode can be seen as a call to enter into the 'depth dimension' of life; for "Deep calls to deep" (Ps 42:7).

**Linking the Psalm and the Second Reading to the Theme:** In three turbulent chapters (chs 9-11) Paul wrestles with the mystery of the apparent failure of God's plans for Israel—the 'chosen people'. He expresses his "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" (v.2) because they reject the Messiah, Jesus. He then mentions seven privileges which the Israelites had over all other peoples—(a) adoption as God's children (b) glory; i.e., Yahweh's special presence manifested by the cloud, the temple, etc. [Ex 40:34; 1 Kgs 8:10-11]; (c) covenants; (d) law; (e) worship; and, (f) patriarchs; and above all, (g) the Messiah. Despite all these gifts, they still refuse to accept the Christ.

### **Two Current Challenges for Distancing and Depth**

Social Distancing and Church Communion: Peter's encounter with Jesus becomes exemplar of the Church's encounter with Christ. During the Covid crisis, life tosses us about and makes us cry, "Save us!" Rather than save us by shortcuts, Jesus appears in life's storms, saying, "*Courage! It is I! ..... Come!*" Are we ready—as individuals and church—to leave the secure boat and 'go forth' to love and serve all Christ's 'least' sisters and brothers?

Ascent to the Depths: The Taittiriya Upanishad describes five koshas (sheaths layers) characteristic of the human: [a] *annarasamaya* (body), [b] *pranamaya* (life), [c] *manomaya* (mind), [d] *vignanamaya* (knowledge), and [e] *anandamaya* (bliss). The fifth layer is the deepest core of one's being where one encounters God whose essence is Bliss. Benedictine Swami Abhishiktananda's spiritual diary is entitled "Ascent to the Depths of the Heart." The deeper one goes, the higher one gets; and, the further one ventures, the closer will one come to One closest to oneself, the *Antarayami* (divine indweller): God.

**An Appropriate Story:** When a storm arose at sea, a huge passenger ship was being tossed about by mighty winds and waves. Panic-stricken, the passengers ran helter-skelter on the deck begging God to save them. Amidst the chaos, little Abhaya stared calmly at the raging sea. Seeing the small girl so composed, a passenger barked, "Hey kid, aren't you afraid?" She replied: "Why worry? My daddy's the captain!" If God is the captain, why worry? God says to us: "Courage! It is I!"

\*\*\*\*\*