

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

1 Kings 19:9, 11-13; Psalm 85 (84); Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:22-33

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Matt. 14:22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Matt. 14:28 Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” 29 He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” 32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”



INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

There are two stories here, of which the second could not exist without the first. The walking on the water is found also in Mark 6:45-52 (with his own special ending) and in Luke 6:15-21. It is worth comparing the versions to hear the distinctive voice of each writer. The story of Peter sinking is found only in

Matthew.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) The narrative of this Psalm seems very close to Matthew’s account:

Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity; they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits’ end. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they

were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders. (Psalms 107:23–32)

(ii) But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name

Thought for the day

“Do to be afraid” is one of those expressions which goes straight to the heart. Who has not sometimes been afraid? The command not to fear combines two things: firstly, it is a recognition that yes, sometimes we are afraid; secondly, it proclaims that in the community of faith, with Jesus, God-with-us, our companion on the way, we ought really to be free from deep fear, because “all shall be well.” Let us hear again the words, “Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid.”

Prayer

Lord, save us when circumstances seem to overwhelm, when we cannot see our way forward, when we find ourselves sinking. Take us by the hand and lead to the open space of freedom and confidence in you.

forever, and this my title for all generations. (Exodus 3:13–15)

(iii) There is implied reference to Moses traditions, important for Matthew’s community, made up mostly of Jews.

Matt 14:22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

KIND OF WRITING

(i) From a technical viewpoint, this is an epiphany, that is, the story of an encounter with God, an experience of the numinous. The marks of an epiphany story are: (a) the reader knows in ad-

vance who is appearing; (b) fear and dread are the responses; (c) a recognition moment follows; (d) profound reassurance is given (“Do not be afraid”); (e) those receiving the experience grow in faith. All these elements are present. Epiphany stories in the Gospels would be the Transfiguration and the resurrection appearance narratives.

(ii) The first story is also a symbolic narrative and most closely resembles the just mentioned resurrection appearance narratives. As a story within the ministry, it doesn’t make a lot of sense – why would Jesus act like this? But as a symbolic narrative dealing with a later church situation it makes better sense. The community feels itself to be without the risen Lord; their struggles, symbolised by the sea, seem to get them nowhere; the boat could well be the church—although the “barque of Peter” is later language; in their profound need, the Risen Lord, presents himself and give them the deep reassurance of his presence; such reassurance leads to a new strengthening of faith in the Lord. This symbolic reading is reflected very well in the close prayer below.

(iii) The account of Peter sinking is an appendix, a kind of example story to show that even those closest to the Lord needed again and again to put their faith in him. It might even be a symbolic version of the self-presentation of the Risen Lord to Peter, mentioned several times in the Gospels but never narrated.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Water is a symbol of both life and death; Jesus “walking” on water symbolically has conquered both life and death.

(ii) Peter has a high profile in this Gospel, understandably given that it was written in a time of church formation, in an area and context, Antioch, where Peter was especially prominent. Matthew has the expanded confession of Peter in 16:13-20, where the keys of the kingdom are handed over to him.

(iii) Little faith in a favourite expression of Matthew (4-0-1-0): Matt 6:30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Matt 8:26 And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. Matt 14:31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Matt 16:8 And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread?”

ST PAUL

“And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2:20)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 22 In Matthew, Jesus is often “in charge”, directing things. In this case, he compels them to depart—no reason is given, but from a narrative point of view it prepares for the divine manifestation to come.

Verse 23 Jesus acts like Moses in going up the mountain. Jesus is alone and the disciples are without him.

Verse 24 Futile effort and impossible odds are symbolised by the sea (Ps 18:7; 32:6; 69:2).

Verse 25 Early in the morning may recall resurrection appearances. But, at the same time, it refers to the fourth watch, that is between 3.00 and 6.00 A.M.), that is, the darkest hour of the night, but also the time of God’s help (Ex 14:24; Ps 46:5). Walking on the sea is a symbol of power over death. Any naturalistic explanation (“it was foggy and he was walking on the *shore*”) are beside the point. The same Jesus has already calmed the storm in this Gospel (8:22-27).

Verse 26 The reactions are part of the epiphany style.

Verse 27 “Courage” is exactly what they need; “It is I” = YHWH of Ex 3:14. See also Deut 32:39; Is 41:4; 43:1-13. *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.* (Isaiah 43:2)

Verse 28 Even in symbolic narrative, Peter’s character comes through. This is the first of several instances where Peter takes centre stage. Are we to view him positively or negatively? Peter does respond to Jesus’ symbolic power over death and does ask to be saved. He does have faith, however small. At the same time his request is impulsive and presumptuous (only God controls death). Peter wants to leave the boat, thus spectacularly abandoning the others!

Verse 29 “Walking on the water” =

sharing the victory of the Risen Lord.

Verse 30 A bit late in the day!!! His prayer to be saved comes from the heart. The text doesn’t say here that Peter doubted (an attitude) but that he became frightened (a feeling). In this verse, “to sink” is the same word in 18:6, where it means “do drown.”

Verse 31 Tremendous image of Jesus reaching out and catching hold of him.

Verse 32 They calm they desired, from the Psalm.

Verse 33 Then comes the moment of worship. While the story does portray both church and discipleship, the real centre is Christology—who is Jesus?

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The story illustrates the power of faith. Have you noticed that when you believe in someone, or something, you can do things that would not be possible when you are full of doubts? Recall moments when your faith gave you strength and courage? Name for yourself the different kinds of faith that had this effect: belief in yourself, trust in another, faith in God.

2. When Jesus got into the boat the winds ceased. Who has been a Jesus person for you and helped to calm a storm that frightened you or made you anxious?

3. The experience of Peter gives encouragement to us when we waver in our trust and belief in God. In his doubt and fear Jesus reached out to him. Who has reached out a helping hand to you when you felt you were sinking?

4. The story ends with a profession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Have you had experiences of being rescued from some hazard or danger, experiences which deepened your faith in the presence and compassion of God for you?

PRAYER

God of all power, your sovereign word comes to us in Christ.

When your church is in danger, make us firm in our trust; when you people falter, steady our faith.

Show us in Jesus your power to save, that we may always acclaim him as Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave

1 Kgs 19:1 *Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." 3 Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.*

1 Kgs 19:4 *But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." 5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." 6 He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. 7 The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." 8 He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. 9 At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.*

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 *He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."*

1 Kgs 19:11 *He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14 He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." 15 Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. 16 Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. 17 Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. 18 Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The lectionary reading—an engaging and enticing image—is actually quite short (19:9, 11-13), but to make sense of it as a whole, the full context is given here. The entire scene may be entitled "The Renewal of Elijah's authority" or "The empowerment of Elijah." The core epiphany has always had a special appeal.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

This story cannot really be read without reference to the previous tale of the destruction of the priests of Baal in 1 Kings 18. It is likely that a later editor adjusted chapter 18 with various inser-

tions to link it with chapters 17 and 19. As it stands now, the full account above serves a few purposes: (i) it contrasts where Elijah should have been (Palestine) and where he actually is (Horeb); it contrasts the despondency of Elijah with the extraordinary power of YHWH revealed paradoxically in the apparent powerlessness of the gentle breeze; (iii) it closes with a renewed and ambitious programme. The commentary will be confined to vv. 9-14, the lectionary excerpt.

KIND OF WRITING

At the centre of the reading is a theophany, an experience of God's presence, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. This

encounter now stands at the centre of a renewed prophetic call.

As a renewed prophetic call, the full reading does have a shape, as follows:

1. Elijah returns to the place of original empowerment. (vv. 1-8)
2. God: revelation and challenge (vv. 9-14)
3. Commission (vv. 15-18)

The lectionary selection comes from the middle section and has its own pattern:

- 9a: Arrival at the mountain of God
9b-12a: Initial potential presence
12b-14: Elijah emerges from the cave

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The passing of the Lord

And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." (Exodus 33:21-23)

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7)

Symbols of God's presence

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. (Exodus 19:16-19)

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The delightful Psalm 85 (84) fits very well the story of Elijah. *I will hear what the Lord God has to say, a voice that speaks of peace.* Appropriately, this is a prayer for revival, a tone matching that of the

dispirited Elijah.

THE GOSPEL LINK

The Gospel also offers an implied contrast between the terrifying power of nature and the gentleness of Jesus' appearance.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

The theophany to Elijah on Horeb (= Sinai) parallels that of Moses. Cf. the OT above.

Verse 9 Notice the precision of place ("that place", "there"). Elijah is hiding. This cave evokes the cleft in the rock which shield Moses from the glory of God (Ex 33:17-23).

Verse 10 Elijah summarises the story so far: he did his best, he was not received. On the contrary, his message was rejected and, as the last of "your" prophets, his life is under threat. Cf. *When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" He answered, "I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals.* (1Kings 18:17-18) Notice the list: covenant, altars, prophets. V. 14 is a repeat for dramatic insistence. Elijah does exaggerate: see 1 Kings 17:24; 18:3-4.

Verse 11a The Lord directs the prophet out of his place of hiding.

Verses 11b-12a Familiar symbols of the presence of the Lord (see the OT background above): wind, earthquake, fire. Cf. Judg 5:4-5; Pss 18:7-15; 68:7-8; Hab 3:15.

Verse 12b The phrase used here has been variously translated:

...a soft murmuring sound. (JPS)...after the fire a still small voice. (KJV) After the fire, there was a soft whisper. (NET) ... after the fire, a light silent sound. (NABRE) And after the fire, a light murmuring sound. (NJB) ...and after the fire a faint murmuring sound. (REB) ... after the fire a sound of sheer silence. (NRSV)

The rather poetic NRSV is uncertain but close to the Septuagint ("a vibrant silence"). The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "a gentle little breeze."

Verse 13 To make sense, we must imagine the Elijah has retreated into the cave and is now enticed out by the gentle movement of the air. Moses also covered his face.

Verse 14 This repeated message of despondency means that the prophet has

no strength left except the strength that YHWH may give him.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In the wider story, it is clear that Elijah is very downcast, dispirited and to some degree defeated. Perhaps now or in the past, you have found yourself in a similar situation. How helped? How was it? Looking back could you see God in it all?

2. Our reading appeals to us to recognise God not only in the drama of nature and life but all in inner stillness and surprising gentleness. Have you found this to be true in your own life?

PRAYER

Gentle and elusive God, you come to us in expected guises. Help us to be open to your surprising presence, that we may set aside our expectations, our agenda for the spiritual path, and may be drawn by you into our life with you. Amen.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

1 Kings 19:9, 11-13

Recognising the presence of God is not always easy and he comes to us in expected ways, when we least expect it. In story, the prophet Elijah is very downcast and in need of God's help, not just to keep going but even to keep alive.

Second reading

Romans 9:1-5

Paul the theologian can sometimes seem almost superhuman in his faith and commitment. In this reading, we glimpse the human Paul. As Jew, he feels tremendous sadness that only a few of his fellow Jews came to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. It is not only felt but powerfully expressed.

Gospel

Matthew 14:22-33

Our gospel story is a kind of parable. At the time of writing, some felt that "being church" was too hard and that somehow God was no longer with them. Into that context of fear and despondency, Matthew offers us encouragement.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

For the next two weeks, we read from the prophet Ezekiel, whose words have had a tremendous influence on Christian imagination. Along with Isaiah and Jeremiah, he is one of the major prophets.

He ministered as priest and prophet up to the time of the destruction and Jerusalem and afterwards he experienced the deportation to Babylon. The book, however, is not "raw" prophecy, but a very carefully written literary and theological composition, suggesting leisure and deep reflection.

Monday 11 August St Clare

Ezekiel 1:2-5, 24-28

For the next two weeks, we hear from the extraordinary book of the prophet Ezekiel. It begins today with his calling.

Tuesday 12 August

Ezekiel 2:8-3:4

In a very graphic way, the function or role of a prophet is illustrated. The prophet must ingest and digest the message and only then may he or she speak.

Wednesday 13 August

Ezekiel 9:1-7, 10:18-22

Ezekiel lived at a time of tremendous unfaithfulness. The story we read today is not meant as a description of something which actually happened but rather a warning, even a threat that people should reform their lives. Ezekiel is always aware of God as mystery, greater than our words, our minds and our heart.

Thursday 14 Aug St Maximilian Kolbe

Ezekiel 12:1-12

From time to time, prophets illustrate their teaching by a mini-drama, a kind of prophetic gesture. Today's reading is one of the best known.

Friday 15 August The Assumption

Apocalypse 11:19, 12:1-6, 10

Originally, this reading is about the Christian church, under God's protection no matter what terrible threat.

1 Corinthians 15:20-26

As usual, in St Paul, the first and second Adams are linked. This is our hope.

Luke 1:39-56

See special notes for the Assumption.

Saturday 16 August

Ezekiel 18:1-10, 13, 30-32

The reading tells of an important moment in the religious teaching of ancient Israel. Else where it is said—firmly and repeatedly—that punishment for sins will go down through the generations. Here, however, individual responsibility is discovered and declared.