

Lectio Divina – 19th Sunday of the Year A

Matthew's Gospel (in brief)

- Composed between 80-90 CE
- Author is anonymous, but named as 'Matthew the tax collector' by later tradition.
- Written in scholarly 'synagogue' Greek.
- Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
- Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: "When Jesus had finished...."):
 1. Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy
 2. 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
 3. 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
 4. 3rd: 13 Parable Discourse
 5. 4th: 18 Community Discourse
 6. 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
- May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
- Jesus first words are 'to fulfil all righteousness'.
- A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
- 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
- The only Gospel to explicitly mention the 'Church' – Matthew is theologian of the church.
- Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
- Names Jesus as 'Messiah' at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 14:22-33 - things to notice

- Follows directly after the feeding of the 5,000. Belongs to the section "God's Kingdom on Earth – the church of Christ.
- Notice the movements in the text:
 1. Jesus sends the disciples away in a boat (symbol of the church), to 'the other side' (of the lake – into Gentile territory – the world)
 2. Jesus goes up into the hills alone to pray
 3. He is there (in the hills) in the evening, while they are 'far out' on the lake in the middle of a storm, facing a 'heavy head-wind' – perhaps a symbol of the hostile forces of the world. 'Waves' are an OT symbol of death.
 4. Jesus walks towards them on the water; they are terrified, they do not recognise him, they think he is a ghost.
 5. Jesus speaks to them, 'Courage...do not be afraid', but doubt and fear are not dispelled (the disciples are slow to recognise Jesus and to believe fully)
 6. Peter's dialogue with Jesus: 'If it is you, tell me to come to you' – wanting to believe but needing proof. Peter represents all the disciples and, perhaps, many members of Matthew's church. Faith is there, but will it be strong enough?
 7. 'Come (to me)' – an often repeated phrase in Matthew & the other Gospels. An invitation to faith and love.
 8. Peter walks on the water – he shares Jesus' divine power for a moment, but sinks when fear and doubt overcome him.
 9. 'Lord, save me' – the constant cry of the church.
 10. Jesus puts out his hand *at once* (no hesitation) to save Peter and 'held him' – there is warmth and strength in Jesus' support of Peter.
 11. 'Man of little faith, why doubt?' – an invitation to trust and also a hint of Peter's denials yet to come. Also, a message to Matthew's community to trust in Jesus.
 12. The wind drops – the presence of Jesus in the boat (Church) brings calm.
 13. The disciples understand what has happened, their faith is increased and they make their confession of faith: 'You are the Son of God'.
- The whole episode seems to be a challenge to a very strong and robust faith in Jesus as Son of God. Sometimes that faith has to be bold and to step out into the unknown, even the feared – as Peter did.

Peter asks to experience Jesus' power over water and is invited by Jesus to step out of the boat. The presence of divine power is there; Peter walks on the water. But the experience does not elevate Peter to another realm, beyond that of his fellow disciples. The same man who a few minutes before recoiled in fear before a ghost now walks towards that ghost.

Walking with Jesus on land or water does not mean that one is magically transported beyond one's fears, hatreds, weaknesses or strengths. If anything, it sharpens one's awareness of these. In Peter's case it is fear; more than responding to Jesus' invitation to walk on water, he needs to respond to Jesus' words 'do not fear'. The experience challenges Peter and the disciples to face and overcome, not the forces of nature, but the things that make us afraid to live our lives fully as Christians with all their joys and sorrows, because we do not trust God completely.

A number of commentators hold that this passage was designed to send a message to the struggling early church which was beset with difficulties, persecution and fear (note the earlier version of this story in 8:23-27). Jesus is there to help them but they need to trust him completely, even when the powers set against them seem overwhelming. Those who, like Peter, fail are rebuked but as long as they cry to the Lord in their weakness-again, like Peter-Jesus will not abandon them.

The story serves as a call to those who have fallen by the wayside to avail of God's mercy and walk again in company with the Lord. (*Mark O'Brien, ABC of Sunday Matters p.A122*)

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The first reading is from the Old Testament First Book of Kings. It recalls Elijah's experience of God on Mount Horeb. There was plenty to make Elijah afraid: mighty wind, earthquake and fire. Elijah does not detect the presence of God in any of these forces of nature. It is in the sound of a 'gentle breeze' (better translation: sheer silence) that Elijah feels God's presence. That is why he goes out of the cave with his face covered.

A mighty wind also features in the Gospel, but God is not in the wind or storm. God is in the gentle, calming presence of Jesus. Whereas Elijah recognises and responds to the presence of God, the disciples in the Gospel are much slower.

Note that both Elijah and Jesus are communing with God on mountains.

Reflection

Trust is an essential element in the formation of faith. This section of St Matthew's Gospel is about the Kingdom of God being seen in the Church when human needs are responded to with the life of God.

Jesus is forming the faith of the disciples and helping them to understand that they can do great and unexpected things if they allow the grace of God to work in them. For that to happen, the disciples must have faith in Christ. They must learn to sense the presence of God within themselves just as Elijah learnt to recognise the presence of God in the gentle breeze. Jesus and Elijah remain in communion with God through moments of solitary prayer.

St Matthew uses the story of Jesus approaching the disciples across the water to illustrate the confidence and trust the disciple needs to have in Christ. The story also shows how fear can erode faith and shake confidence.

For the people in Matthew's community this story was a call to faith, trust, courage and boldness in the midst of hostile forces - the things that make us afraid to live our lives fully as Christians with all their joys and sorrows - because we do not trust God completely. Peter's actions in the story are a mixture of impulsive love and faith weakened by doubt. Peter and the others see clearly for the first time exactly who Jesus is.