

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Job 38:1, 8-11

Ps 106:23-26, 28-32

2 Cor 5:14-17

Mark 4:35-41

In late March last year, the whole world saw the striking footage of Pope Francis praying alone in Saint Peter's square. As evening rain fell in the empty square, the Holy Father led the global Church—and indeed much of the world—in prayer for all those suffering from the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting lockdowns. The occasion provided some of the most powerful imagery of his pontificate, as an old man—himself hobbled by sciatica—gazed upon a stark crucifix, reflected on Scripture, and offered Benediction for the city and the world.

The Scripture text he chose to reflect upon is our Gospel passage today. And it's certainly very apt. As the storms rage around us—as they literally did that night, and as they do for us this morning—Christ is seen sleeping on the boat. As the world descends into suffering and fear, there was and is a temptation to think that God must be asleep at the wheel – that God somehow doesn't care.

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As is reflected in our first reading and psalm, the sea has long been considered a threatening, chaotic and potentially destructive element, which God the Creator alone can govern and calm. With several experienced sailors among their number, the disciples seemed rightly worried that their lives were in danger, and rightly baffled at how their master could be sleeping at such a perilous time.

The image of Christ asleep while storms rage around us—"Don't you care God?"—is a temptation for all of us when things seem to fall apart. Can we trust God in the dark moments?

Upon waking, Jesus rebukes the wind and orders the sea to be calm, speaking to it as if it were identified with the power of the evil one. He then seems frustrated at his follower's extraordinary capacity to miss the point, to not see what is self-evident to him. The disciples are still only beginners at the way of being that Christ is inviting them into, and they make the mistake of being too preoccupied with concerns of the flesh (in this case, preserving their bodies).

Christ didn't come primarily so that people would be physically secure, or that they might be kind and gentle with each other, or so that our material needs would be met, or so that we would be of sound psychological health. These are all good and necessary things, but they are the side-effects of his central mission – which is to completely realign us in relationship to the love of the Father, a re-alignment which

topples our old, corrupt notions of God and our place in the world, and which leaves nothing untouched in terms of the subsequent living out of our lives.

For the disciples part, they are left wondering among themselves: “*Who can this man be?*” We regard the ocean as a force so fierce that no human might can contain it. But it was precisely in relation to the sea that Jesus exhibited his supreme authority – commanding that very element which, as I’ve noted, our earlier readings affirmed were under the control of God alone. As a result, the ‘awe’ that the disciples formerly had for the furious sea, they now focus upon Jesus.

In our second reading, Saint Paul affirmed that “for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation” – new things have come, greater than the laws of nature.

The disciples’ movement from being impressed by the things of this world to being impressed by the Lord, is a move we all must make—and remake each day—as the world tries ever more frantically to impress us. However, with the eyes of faith we can see that, compared with the glory of the Lord, all the world ultimately has to offer is what Shakespeare once described as “sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Furthermore, it is not just the Lord’s brute power that leaves us in awe, but the fact that such power is used not to dominate but to love. As Saint Paul also says in our second reading, “The love of Christ overwhelms us.”

The dangerous forces of nature do not have the final say. There is another force at work in the world, a force that is capable of transforming and renewing all creation – namely, the power of Christ’s love.

By demonstrating his dominion over the sea, Jesus’ power is revealed to be of divine origin – one which acts upon the cosmos, but in a way that the world fails to comprehend. And indeed, the disciple’s faith is not yet firm: it is being formed – it remains at this point a mingling of fear and trust. On the other hand, Jesus’ confident abandonment to the Father is total and pure. This is why he could sleep during the storm, completely safe in God’s arms.

Of course, the time would come when Jesus too would feel fear and anguish. When his ‘hour’ came—in his Passion and death—he would feel the full burden of humanity’s sins upon him, like a wave at high tide about to break. That was indeed to be a terrible tempest, not cosmic but spiritual. It was to be the final, extreme assault of evil against the Son of God.

Yet, in that hour Jesus did not doubt in the power of God the Father or in his closeness, even though he had to experience to the full the distance of hatred from love, of falsehood from the truth, of sin from grace. He experienced this drama in himself with excruciating pain, especially in Gethsemane, before his arrest, and then throughout his Passion until his death on the Cross. In that hour, despite the

separation and abandonment he felt, Jesus fully gave himself to the Father. And through this supreme act of trust and self-offering, the salvation of the world was won.

Amidst the storms that we face in our time, we get to relive this mystery of our salvation in this very Mass. Upon this altar, Christ's perfect sacrifice is re-presented to the Father, who once again takes the anguish and fear of our world and transforms it into a supreme gift of life and love.

This is a gift of love that embraces all of us, and indeed all of creation. From this church, the Lord's blessing pours out into our world of seeming chaos, offering a peace that the powers of darkness cannot overcome. Though our faith is often weak like that of the disciples in the Gospel, our Lord assures us—as he did them—that we need not be afraid. He does not leave us at the mercy of the storm, but calms our fears. And he sends us forth from this place back into the world, to be witnesses to his peace and love in our troubled world that secretly yearns for the peace that only Christ can bring.