

Homily for The Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)(9th August 2020)

The readings for today's Mass take us to a place that we would probably rather not visit: they take us into a place of deep darkness, into an experience of paralyzing fear.

Elijah has just put to the sword all 450 prophets of Baal, after first proving that they were charlatans. The prophets of Baal were the favourites of the Queen, because they conveniently used to tell her what she wanted to hear, so she has sworn that Elijah will end up as dead as they are. That is why he is hiding in a cave, wishing he was dead. But this will not do, because there is still work to be done. God pursues him and sends him back to work, but not before he leads Elijah into the mystery of his presence. You might think that, with the Queen on his tail, Elijah might like a God who was ready to smite a few enemies: but God shows Elijah a powerful wind, and an earthquake, and some fire, none of which reveal God. He is revealed, instead, in a soft gentle breeze. God is in the gentleness, not in the destruction. Elijah's fear comes from his choosing to fight destruction with more destruction, to fight power with more power. But God reveals to him that if he wants to be close to God he must seek him in gentleness and silence, not in raging power. And this seems to do the trick because now Elijah is up, and off, and back in business and within days he has anointed Elisha to become his successor and he is once more about the Lord's affairs. Our fear can make us panic and rush around looking for some way to defeat it, but Elijah learns that the first thing to do with fear is to sit quietly with it in God's presence.

The Gospel story is another story of fear overcome. Peter and the other disciples are in a boat, while Jesus has remained on land, praying. Disaster strikes, as night falls and the wind gets up. By the time that our story happens in the hours before Dawn, the boat has been tossed about on a dark and stormy sea for hours. It is quite difficult for us to get into the experience of these men, but they are at the mercy of two of the things that people of their day feared most. Travelling on land a storm is inconvenient and disorientating, but at least the ground is stable; on the water nothing can be relied upon. Added to that, it is pitch dark. The sea is a symbol of unmanageable chaos for ancient people – but it is more than a sign, it actually is unmanageable and chaotic. The dark is a place of uncertainty, where hidden dangers lurk. Things could not be much bleaker for the disciples. The figure that they see walking towards them makes them even more afraid. They think it is a ghost. How bizarre, they are prepared to believe that a ghost might be walking across the lake towards them, but it doesn't occur to them that it might be Jesus. This shows us what fear does to us: it robs us of our reason, of our sense of proportion and we end up believing crazy things. But Peter has a glimpse of reality and he sees things as they really are. When Jesus says 'Courage, I AM!' Peter asks to join him. It is Peter's idea to set out across the water, not Jesus'. Peter does something extraordinary, he confronts the fear head on. He is frightened by the ghostly figure, but he heads towards it; he is frightened of the surging seas, but he steps out onto them. For a moment he then loses focus, and the storm feels more real than Jesus does, so he starts to sink, but his rescue

means that he has confronted his fear and the source of his fear has become the source of his triumph.

Fear is one of the Devil's favourite tools, that he uses to fragment and atomise our communities. Fear of the stranger makes us inward-looking and defensive; fear of the other makes us aggressive and protective; fear of looking foolish makes us arrogant and unwilling to change our minds; fear of failure makes us timid or false; fear of aging makes us vain and self-obsessed; fear of death makes us frightened and unable to live life to the full. Elijah shows us that fear is best answered in silence, weakness and stillness, not in power and noisy self-promotion. The Gospel reading shows us that only fears confronted can be defeated, when they can become trophies of triumph instead of crippling burdens. When we are frightened or anxious, turned in on ourselves and unable to do anything, the Lord who walks on the chaos asks us to raise our eyes, and fix them on him: Courage, I AM, come to me.