

Sunday Between 7th and 13th August [19]

Matthew 14:22-36

The readings for today, every one of them, speaks of our current international situation. You know how it is, sometimes you open the bible and begin to read only to see a passage in a totally new light, specific to your current circumstances, well that's how it felt reading this week's set texts with the current affairs of war and persecution so prevalent in the world.

As we face daily news which leaves us feeling sad and helpless we can find in the words of scripture an echo of that helplessness and of God's response. St. Paul, writing to the Church in Rome, a church persecuted every bit as cruelly as the Christians we hear about in the middle east today, has words of comfort and logic to strengthen those who are threatened because of their beliefs.

He reminds them, and us, that scripture says that no one who has faith will be put to shame and everyone who calls upon the Lord will be saved. Paul goes on to show us how we can play our part as members of the same persecuted body of Christ, as he encourages the Christians in Rome not only to stay strong in their faith but to even share it despite the risks. Here we are in a country where we have freedom to worship without any more persecution than the odd scornful challenge from an atheist, the least we can do is be true to our faith, stand up and be counted, and share with others some understanding of why what we believe in is too precious to give up just because our lives are at risk. That is how the persecuted Christians feel, that is what they are telling journalists and anyone who will listen, their lives are at risk, yes, but their souls are at stake and far more precious.

And we are reminded of Jesus' miracle of walking on water in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus, after feeding the 5,000 men and the additional women and children, finally got his time to be alone in prayer and asked his disciples to stay in the boat. As the night advanced, the boat drifted around, and the disciples lost sight of Jesus until early in the morning, there he was, moving towards them atop the water's surface. As the disciples faced something they had never seen before and were understandably shaken with fear, Jesus spoke the words that they needed to hear, and those same words are what we need to hear when we are afraid. He said, it's me, do not be afraid.

With our eyes on Jesus we need never be afraid. His disciples certainly were calmed when they realised who it was. Jesus is mighty and can do extraordinary things in our lives but he is the embodiment of Good, and for that reason we need never be afraid when we see his hand upon our lives or the lives of others. When we look at the news and see the devastation, if we can find Christ's hand in the midst of it, in the aid worker, or the person who hides the fugitive, wherever goodness overpowers the effects of evil, there is Jesus and we need not fear.

The disciples were so relieved at seeing that it was Jesus on the water that Peter decided to go to him in the same way. In that moment of realisation of the mighty act of God, Peter had faith, faith enough to do anything. But no sooner did he leave the boat, than he took his eyes off Jesus and saw the threat of what was going on around him, the wind and the waves surrounding him in danger and that faith was weakened and he began to sink. Jesus asks that convicting question, why did you doubt? It was a fair question, Jesus had never given his disciples any reason to doubt him. And yet, we are all at risk of letting our doubts overcome our faith. Not that we are left to struggle with our doubts, Jesus immediately responded to Peter's lack of faith with a firm hand and safely put him back in the boat, but we have no need to allow our doubts to win. Jesus has never given us any reason for that. And so as we feel helpless we must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

God is at work in our world, we have felt that through our lives, our encounters, our answered prayers, our witness of others. Those who fight on behalf of God, for God's purpose, have failed utterly to understand the nature of God. God is love and it is impossible for love to go after another in hate, even if the other is unlike us or opposed to us. Jesus said, love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you. It's not always what our first response to our enemies looks like, but it is what we are called to do.

Just as a dark room will always be illuminated by the presence of light, however small the source of that light, the darkness can never be too much to blot out light; so it is with love. While there is love, evil cannot fully take hold. Let us pray that we can find ways to support those parts of Christ's body, of which we are members, that are suffering and let us be willing to stand alongside those who are persecuted and tell anyone who will listen and show by our loving actions towards everyone that we meet, that we too are Christians.