



The new SHOFAR

Ordinary Sunday 19

1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33 - *God surprises!*

Elijah and his feet of clay

This story from Elijah's ministry needs to begin at the opening of the chapter, with an account of his escape into the desert. It is a great story and flows on from his battle with the Canaanite prophets on Mt Carmel. Such was the enormity of his victory that Queen Jezebel decided it was time for the pesky prophet of God to die. Faced with this particularly vicious woman, Elijah took the only action possible...*he was afraid and fled for his life!*

After one full day of running we find him sitting *under a furze bush wishing he was dead*. Here is one of the great and powerful figures of the Hebrew Scriptures and he is frightened? This was not the end of it, because after obtaining a little bit of food and drink from God's hands, he kept on running for forty more days! Now that's fear. When he had run out of energy and reasons for living he lay down in a cave on Mt Horeb and tried to sleep.

One of the great things in this story is the way God nibbles away at Elijah. He refuses to let him rest and just when he manages to doze off, God calls out – *Elijah what are you doing here?* While Elijah gave up on God, the Lord God did not give up on the prophet. Never. Elijah thinks it is unfair that God should allow his faithful servants to suffer. He has worked hard for God, endured much and given up even more but God is allowing Jezebel to harass him. How can that be fair? If God truly was God, fire bombs would rain down from the heavens and destroy the wicked queen and all of her supporters. Elijah could then succeed.

Elijah was looking for the wrong God

On Mt Carmel, God had indeed shown the fullness of divine power...*then the fire of Yahweh fell and consumed the sacrifices* and the prophets of Baal were killed. For Elijah, that must have seemed like a perfect God. If that was the way God acted towards the enemies of his servants, all would be well and people would flock in to worship Yahweh.

God sent three signs to Elijah in the cave. There was a mighty storm, so powerful that it tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks. But God was not in the storm. Then there was the sign of the earthquake. That too was incredibly fierce but God was not in the earthquake. There was a third sign, this time an all-consuming fire but God was not there either. How disappointed must the prophet have been. These were all the very things for which he was praying and yet God was in none of them. Did that mean God was not present? Did it mean God was not concerned about what Elijah thought he needed, that the persecution of God's prophet was a sign of the absence of God in his ministry?

Surprise surprise – the God of surprises does things His way

Yahweh God reminds Elijah as to how there is a divine plan for the whole of creation and that Israel's God was at work in human history. It may appear that Jezebel is winning but her days are already numbered. All the prophet needs to do is to keep his eyes firmly fixed on the task ahead and entrust the future to God. Running away or sitting back hoping is not the way to find God, for the Almighty is already "out there" inviting us to join Him. The truth is, that divine presence is most likely going to be present in ways that are unexpected, ways that will come as a complete surprise to us, shattering all of our expectations. Let go. Let God.

No matter how wonderful we think we are - we all need God

The account of Jesus walking on water and reigning over the storm is one of the great stories from the Gospels. There is no point in debating its veracity or trying to work out how it could have happened for Matthew is not the slightest bit interested in those things. He wants us to read the miracle account as he presents it and let the Spirit lead us to what it is God wants us to take from what we find here.

They rowed all night and got nowhere. Why is it that this little insight speaks so eloquently of many of our own experiences of discipleship? We can be busy in all kinds of ways in Church matters and yet for all of our talking and our actions, we never seem to get very much further forward in our plans and towards our goals. Our parishes, which were once so full and so alive now seem in decline and in danger of fading away. What's happening? This is the exact kind of situation Matthew is addressing with this account of Jesus' miracle.

The issue worth contemplating with today's gospel is not the goal towards which they were aiming. That was good and Jesus-declared. Their problem is the means used in reaching it and this is shown up by the contrast between their "travelling on their own" and their "travelling with Jesus". On their own they were defeated by the storm and the wind. With Jesus in the boat the storm became as nothing and they quickly found themselves on the beach. That's the story of Church, the pattern necessary for faithful discipleship and the boat, the storm and the waters are all meant to be taken and applied to our own lives.

Courage! Its me! Do not be afraid!

Matthew's struggling Church did battle with all kinds of harassments and persecutions from outside groups and internally from destructive malcontents and it is this kind of situation the evangelist is addressing in this miracle story. He reminds his Church how obstacles, opponents, indifference and fears are no reasons for failing to take the gospel out into the world. The "winds" and "storms" raging around the Gospel faithful are powerless for those individuals and faith communities living with Christ active in their midst.

Here is the problem: the disciples in the boat did not recognize Jesus when he came to them *walking on the water*. What was their problem? Surely this is the same Jesus they had just left on the beach? They knew him there but in the present circumstances they thought he was a ghost? It was not just that they did not recognize him. He was a ghost, an ephemeral figure.

For Matthew, the danger for the Church is our blindness to *Christ-with-us*. So conscious are we of our problems, difficulties and anxieties we forget Jesus and fail to recognize *Christ-already-with-us*. We are more inclined to look at the "storms", the "winds" and the "waves" and remain immobilized in our parishes and Churches. It is too risky going out in unfriendly weather and we prefer to focus on doing "the best we can manage".

With Jesus, it never comes down to us and our abilities. Our "rowing" has revealed to us our limitations (our rowing and sailing abilities) and no matter how wonderful our intentions may be, it is how we go about achieving them that is under question here. The evangelist is urging his fellow believers to keep Christ foremost in our minds; in our planning, in our day to day activities. If Christ is not central in all we do - and we can assess that by evaluating our own personal prayer life, our reading of the scriptures and our participating in the sacramental life of the Church - and the priority of these things in our parish life.

In obeying Christ, we can even walk on water

With his eyes focused on Jesus rather than on the waves and the wind, Peter could walk on water. When Peter focused on the things threatening him, he sank. That is today's message.