

Don't Freeze, Focus!

Homily for 19th Sunday Ordinary Time
August 13, 2023

Sir Ernest Shackleton was a great explorer who found himself and his crew in a life-or-death crisis when they had to abandon ship in the icy waters around Antarctica.

It was 1914, and Shackleton's expedition had planned an unprecedented land crossing of the frozen continent. When the ship got stuck in the ice and sank, the crew began an unscheduled 18-month survival test. They stayed alive as they moved among the drifting ice floes until they eventually found an island, where they established a camp. When their provision began to run low, Shackleton and several crewmembers boarded one of their salvaged lifeboats and made a daring 1300-kilometre voyage to a whaling station. They later returned with a ship, and all the 27 men survived the ordeal.

There are two types of people during a crisis - those who freeze and those who focus. Shackleton might have been stranded in one of the coldest places on the planet, but he and his team never froze, they focused.

It is this theme that I want to explore with you today, as we delve into the Gospel reading for today and see how St Matthew invites us to read this text as an encouragement, not to freeze but to focus.

The first thing we want to say about this text is how important it became for the early Church. Although the story Matthew tells literally happened this way, those who reflected on this story in subsequent generations read it as an analogy of the Christian life.

What is the boat? It is representative of the Church that heads out onto the waters of the Sea of Galilee. This is a way to picture the Church going on mission into the world. Notice Jesus isn't with them but has gone up on the Mountain to pray. What is this an image of? It is Jesus ascending to heaven where he always lives to make intercession for us. Notice that as the evening lengthens, the boat is battered by the waves and is far from the land. In other words, rescue is difficult. The stormy sea and waves represent the Church's journey through the tumultuous events of this world, both those affecting us personally and those that impact us corporately. We can feel storm tossed and overwhelmed in such circumstances.

Things are very desperate for those in the boat, for we are told it is early morning. Other versions say it is around 4 AM. This is the darkest time of the night and into the storm steps Jesus. His walking on the water is the Gospel writer's way of telling us that while this literally happened once, it can happen in our lives, when we look to Jesus in the middle of life's storms. What Jesus says next is so important: "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid". Jesus is encouraging the Apostles; I God am with you in this storm and don't be afraid, that is don't freeze— rather take heart and stay focused.

This then is enacted by what happens next. Notice it is Peter, the chief Apostle who asks Jesus to bid him to come to him. Let me read the text to you:

Peter, suddenly bold, said, “Master, if it’s really you, call me to come to you on the water.”

He said, “Come ahead.”

Jumping out of the boat, Peter walked on the water to Jesus. But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink. He cried, “Master, save me!”

Jesus didn’t hesitate. He reached down and grabbed his hand. Then he said, “Faint-hearted, what got into you?”¹

Peter’s response is one with which we can all identify. We try to keep our eyes on Jesus but then the storm waves swell, and we freeze rather than stay focused. Jesus’ care of Peter is touching we are told he grabbed his hand and said “Faint-hearted what got into you?” Jesus is so aware of our fear, and he then gets into the boat with us and there is calm. We are then told that the disciples worshipped him. As we look to Jesus it is like Elijah in the first reading. There was the wind, an earthquake, a storm.... But it was in the still small voice where God’s presence was to be noticed.

So, the question is how can we stay focused and not freeze? How do we hear the voice of God. How can we in the twenty-first century keep focused on Christ? Peter could look into Christ's physical eyes, as easily as you can look into mine right now. We won't be able to do that until Judgment Day, when we hope to see him smiling and welcoming us home after our cross-filled journey here on earth.

But in the meantime, we can still keep our eyes fixed on Christ - and not just symbolically. Jesus himself has provided us a real focal point for life; he has made himself present, body, blood, soul, and divinity, in the sacrament of the Eucharist - the ever-present safe harbor for our souls. When we receive Holy Communion, when we gaze upon the Host at Mass, when we come and kneel before the Tabernacle containing the Sacred species, or when we pray in adoration before the Eucharist solemnly exposed, we are doing what Peter did as he stepped out of that fishing boat: fixing our gaze on Christ the Lord, whose love and grace can give us stability among life's storms.

This miracle of Jesus walking on the water and calming the storm takes place right after the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. The two miracles have to do with bread and with Christ's body. And what is the Eucharist if not an ongoing miracle in which Christ's body is truly present under the appearance of bread? Today, as Christ, through this Mass, comes to us once again across in the stormy seas of our concerns, worries, and weaknesses, let's welcome him with confident faith in Jesus. As we fix our gaze on him in the Eucharist, he can keep guiding us through life's stormy seas. By so doing we can grow in responding to life's crises not by freezing but by staying focused. This is how the earliest Christians read this Gospel may it help us too.

¹ Peterson, E. H. (2005). [*The Message: the Bible in contemporary language*](#) (Mt 14:28–31). NavPress.

