

*Just as* the night is about to give way to daybreak, is when fear steals in at my house and finds me most vulnerable. Some small concern, scarcely noticed during daylight hours, takes on monstrous proportions in that still, quiet time just before the dawn. A letter too long neglected. A telephone call left unanswered. A careless word or action or a perceived slight that may have hurt someone.

Fear does not confine itself to that hour of the night, of course. In fact, it controls much of what we do. Fear about financial security prompts career choices or constricts our reactions to the needs of others. Fear for our relationships moves some of us to cling and others to flee. Fear that our labour will amount to nothing produces an obsession that robs vocation of its pleasure.

Fear is the predominate obstacle to God's using us in this world. Fear controls our hearts and minds. Fear is seen in the economic crises with commodity prices, with the cost and loss of housing, with every row of goods in the grocery store as we see the prices rise before our eyes, with global terror, nuclear threats, illness of those we love or ourselves, the very word "cancer" and a myriad of broken relationships.

In today's gospel, we hear the tale of Peter trying to walk on water. The disciples were at sea alone in the boat, a terrible storm had arisen, Jesus was walking toward them across the water like an apparition or ghost, and they were filled with fear. The storm was very, very real, and in that small boat they had good reason to be afraid. To see their beloved Jesus walking across the lake in the dark, in the violence of the storm, doing what was humanly impossible, must have been frightening. To try to do what is humanly impossible by ourselves, without God, is always frightening.

Peter could not walk on that water for one reason: fear. He looked around at the worldly reality of the storm, the physics of the water, the incomprehensibility of the situation, the absurdity of it all, and fear overwhelmed Peter. He began to sink. And then Peter did what we must all do. Peter cried out, "Lord, save me!"

The psalmist cries out too, in Psalm 69:

“Save me O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.  
“I sink in deep mire where there is no foothold;  
“I have come into deep waters and the flood sweeps over me.”

Certainly, from humankind's earliest days on earth, water and the journey over and through water, have been central to our understanding of our place in the world. From the days of the ancient world, the cycles of our life and experience have been told in terms of perilous journeys on water.

What better way to describe life than as a voyage, driven by forces more powerful than ourselves, like wind and wave, sailing upon a rippling surface of events, feeling the joy of movement, being alive and going somewhere. When things go well, we feel the contentment of those experienced sailors, the apostles on their way home across the quiet lake of Galilee. Gales blow up, changing our moods. And our anxieties, problems and pressures of various kinds create in us a fear of drowning or of being devoured by demons lurking in the dark depths. How often a sudden turn of events can rob us of inner peace. Are we on a charted course, or just drifting along without any determined direction? Many find it hard enough to stay afloat in bewilderingly changing times, struggling with family and work relationships, painfully insecure in themselves. Those frightened apostles in the storm can be us today: we are those sailors, tossing about in the waves.

And we try to conjure up our remedies to ease the upsets of our voyage. But weathering the storm paradoxically demands that we first come to recognize and accept our own vulnerabilities. There are, after all, few perfect boats. In spite of our occasional bluster, when the storm hits and the winds blow, most of us still call out for the Lord. Only in giving up our own certainty and our very selves do we find our true depth – and our salvation.

We are searching for the promised land, the Kingdom, the place of peace, wholeness, and well-being. We are searching for our brothers, but like Joseph our voyages tell their own stories of hatred, prejudice, blinding jealousy: but however dysfunctional, our stories are like Joseph's part of divine intervention, salvation history, and God's provision.

Joseph's brothers, of course, had no idea that their actions would lead to their own provision and survival. Their deeds were simply evil. Yet God, even through the evil of the world, works good and wonder. God is the Restorer, the one who takes death and transforms it into resurrection.

God is present where we least expect him, although it is a hidden, unseen presence, not always easy to discover. The apostles were amazed to see Christ coming to them in the middle of the storm, Elijah, that lonely refugee, faithful to his God despite cruel persecution by Jezebel, discovered the mysterious presence of God in the still, small voice of his own soul. Standing at the mouth of a cave, on the slopes of the holy mountain, he got strength and comfort from the Living God. Where God is, there is peace. But his presence is everywhere, for those who learn to discern it.

Joseph became the instrument in God's plan of love and provision, able to help his entire family when famine came. It was the kind of help that transcends knowing or understanding but is contained in love and forgiveness and mercy. God's help came through human hands, human love, human forgiveness. Jacob was able to overcome the human tendency to judge or reject those who had harmed him.

Peter, that most humans of the disciples, faltered in his belief when he tried to repeat Jesus' amazing act of walking on the water. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Logic would say that no one could walk on the rolling waves. But Jesus did walk on the water because his belief was absolute, and, more important, he showed his disciples, those people who would have to endure many hardships and even death in his name, what their faith could do, what their faith could overcome.

There is something for us to reflect here: Jesus is not in the boat; he is in that hostile environment into which we often fear to enter and instead huddle in the security of our church. Is it not significant that Jesus is found outside the boat in the middle of the stormy sea, the world. And we have to go out there to meet him in spite of the dangers and possible setbacks. Too often we Christians spend much, if not all, of our time in the shelter of the boat, taking care of ourselves and neglecting those in the stormy sea who

need to hear the words of life. “Man of little trust, why did you doubt?” How often has Jesus had to say those words to each one of us?

Peter's faith, at best, wavered. In fact during Jesus' earthly ministry, it waffled all over the place. It was rash. It was impetuous. When he saw Jesus walking on the water, Peter was not sure who was actually doing that amazing thing. He yelled out, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." Jesus replied, "Come!" Peter immediately began walking across the sea, but lost heart in the face of the wind and waves. He began to sink, like the rock he was, so Jesus reached out his hand and saved him. And he brought him back to the boat!

There is never any need for fear and anxiety, for Jesus is always close to us and, no matter what may be happening in and around us, his peace is there for us to share. (As the Buddhist saying has it: “Why worry? If I worry, I die. If I don't worry, I die. Why worry?”)

On the one hand, we have to reject the ambitions and dreams of the world and separate ourselves from them but, at the same time, that world which both attracts and threatens is the arena where we are to live out our mission to build the Kingdom of God. We are called to be “not of the world”, a counter-witness to its ways, but to be “in the world”, as taste-giving salt and growth-giving leaven, stepping out in boldness, taking a risk. Storms will blow up in all of our lives. But Jesus has not left us alone. The one who calms the storms and makes the winds to cease is still with us. He still has work for us to do. And yes, it will mean stepping out in faith, but not getting out of the boat, not going it alone, not leaving the community of disciples. The purpose of a ship is to set sail, not to stay at the dock. There are plenty of adventures ahead, and Jesus will bid us follow. And he will say to us, in the midst of any storm, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Our faith must allow us to walk on the disturbed waters of life and it must save us from the depths of the sea when we fall. There are times when we have to get out of the boat!