

BIBLICAL PAGES

by Sr Maria Chiara Ventriglia

Jesus' places and relations

Lectio n° 6 From the earthquake to calm

Fear in us is like an earthquake. It shakes our presumed certainties, but it also alerts us to make us understand that something is threatening us. This is a positive effect, revealing to us that we need a 'dam', that we need to take a stand, to try to get out of a difficult situation, or perhaps that we need to ask for help as we are in danger.

Fear brings out two 'faces': the limit and the potential; the latter must be awakened as it is dormant.

In our text the dormant potential is very concrete. It is a Person, the Lord present in a situation of danger, when the disciples are at sea and the encounter with Him is hindered by fear, which is like a diaphragm between them and Him.

Fear is a typical emotion associated with the sea, which is a place of chaos and danger where Jesus' deed of calming the roaring waters is highlighted. He brings back the great calm, a favourable environment which is necessary to make the 'crossing of life'.

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

*Holy Spirit of God,
come and open the gates of our spirit and of our heart
to the infinite.*

*Open them once and for all
and do not allow us to close them again.*

*Open them to the mystery of God,
and to the immensity of the universe.*

*Open our intellect to the wonderful horizons
of Divine Wisdom.*

*Open our way of thinking
so that it may be ready to welcome
the many points of view different from our own.*

*Open our sympathy to the diversity of temperaments
and personalities that surround us.*

*Open our affection to all those
who are deprived of love,
to those who ask for comfort.*

*Open our charity to the problems of the world,
to all the needs of humanity.*

(Jean Galot)

1. Lectio

(to read the Word / to listen to it)

Matthew 8:23-27

23 Then He got out into the boat, followed by His disciples. 24 Suddenly a storm broke over the lake, so violent that the boat was being swamped by the waves. But He was asleep. 25 So they went to Him and woke Him saying, 'Save us, Lord, we are lost!'

26 And He said to them, 'Why are you so frightened, you who have little faith?' And then He stood up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. 27 They were astounded and said, 'Whatever kind of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?'

Let us approach the text.

This is Chapter 8, part of the section dealing with the Messiah's deeds. Our text represents the core of the section, starting at 8:23 and including three miracles (The calming of the storm, The demoniacs of Gadara, Cure of a paralytic), all of which are focussing on Jesus' identity. This core is geographically limited: Jesus departs by boat and lands in the Gadarene country, then He goes back to His home town (9:1).

The sea is the main place where the disciples' 'sequela' (commitment, following) is put to the test. In the previous verses He had already laid down the clear conditions for following Him. They suggest to us how discipleship, following the Lord, is the necessary premise thanks to which we can acknowledge His deeds of salvation as well as experience the Church (the boat) in a time of trial.

In fact, St Matthew's Gospel, written for the converted Jews of the Seventies, is addressed to a community that was feeling lost, missing the presence of the Lord acting in her favour.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- 23-24 The boat and the sea
- 25-26a They wake Him up
- 26b The messianic deed on the sea
- 27 Conclusion

The boat and the sea

23 Then He got out into the boat, followed by His disciples. 24 Suddenly a storm broke over the lake, so violent that the boat was being swamped by the waves. But He was asleep.

Jesus gets out into the boat. THE boat, not A boat. This article makes us grasp that the boat is definitely the place Jesus wants to get into, and therefore the place of the 'sequela': the verb 'akolouthéo', referring to the disciples, denotes their

following Someone who is preceding them; it is the technical term for 'discipleship'. Jesus and the disciples are in fact in a Master-disciples relationship and the boat becomes the symbol of their unity, of their being together, of their being the primitive community.

Are we all calm together? The boat is sailing in the waters of the Sea of Tiberias, where the 'sea' – as we have already seen elsewhere – is a symbol of the evil forces and chaotic powers that only God is able to dominate, in order to re-establish harmony and peace where chaos used to reign.

The Sea of Tiberias is subject to sudden rises, storms and strong winds, originating especially in the afternoon due to its geographical characteristics and to the sudden temperature changes that occur between different altimetric levels.

In fact, our text immediately shows us the turmoil of the sea. It is interesting to note that St Matthew makes use of the term 'seismos', 'earthquake', which also occurs when Jesus enters Jerusalem (21:10), in the eschatological discourse (24:7), as well as at His death (27:54) and resurrection (28:2). We then understand that that term denotes a connection between the event that is taking place and the death and resurrection of the Lord... a Lord who is now asleep.

The 'earthquake' is a literary motif in St Matthew's Gospel referring to a theophany, a shocking event in which God acts and is recognized (as the Centurion does under the Cross). Consequently, we should read the text as the narration of an event which does not end there.

The terms referring to the covered boat, and to the Lord who is asleep, are respectively a participle and an imperfect, that is, verbs which denote continuity. Furthermore, 'kaluptestai', 'covered', 'hidden', has the same root as 'apekalupsen' which, preceded by a privative means 'revelation', 'revealed' (16:17), 'not hidden'.

The destabilizing events which impetuously hide the boat can be referred in each and every age to the disciples' community, to her being hindered from exposing herself, from testifying openly, from being a revelation of the Lord's Easter. And the events related to her Lord have been so destabilizing for history that they can be compared to an earthquake; however, in the present turmoil He looks as if He were asleep...

The sleeping Lord, rendered with a past continuous, is not only a reference to death but also the symbol of a thorough trust, of the peace and quiet (Ps 4:9) of Jesus being guarded by the Father.

In fact, in sleep we can see the symbolic embrace between death and trust. Verse 20b comes to mind: the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head. The sleeping Jesus makes Easter always present in the community, in the boat, as a continuous passage which occurred in the sleep on the Cross (it is there that He reclines, rests His head, Jn 19:30), from death to the vivifying abandonment to the Father. But for the disciples and St Matthew's whole community, trust in the Lord is a goal to be rediscovered.

They wake Him up

25 *So they went to Him and woke Him saying, 'Save us, Lord, we are lost!'*
26 *And He said to them, 'Why are you so frightened, you who have little faith?'*

...And they go to wake Jesus up. This reminds us of Psalm 45:23: "Wake up, Lord, why are You sleeping?". They need a Lord who acts in their favour. The text literally goes: "You will save us", in our continuous being lost, being ruined. It is not an imperative but a future tense, an expectation which turns into hope. We hope in the future, with a strong certainty. The promise has not been fulfilled yet but still its effects can be experienced in the presence.

The disciples are in need and therefore they have an expectation. What is missing to turn the expectation into hope, that is, 'faith' in a promise already made? Jesus responds by highlighting that the community stumbles because they are fearful, frightened, they have little faith. Waking up the Lord becomes then a necessary step to recognize Him, a step to wake up their own hearts that are afraid of being abandoned.

The community to which St Matthew addresses his gospel is starting to recognize in the One who is asleep their Lord, endowed with power over the sea / evil.

Faith is not born from a need, from the awareness that one cannot face the dangers of the sea on his own, that being lost and ruined is a constant danger (verb in continuous form) that can overwhelm him. Otherwise the disciples in the boat would have a great faith indeed... On the contrary, Jesus accuses them of having "little faith", but this is referring to the fact that they are unable to discern deeply, in a vital and existential way, that the resurrection has transformed death, sleep. Their expectation of a Lord who intervenes when we are in need must be transformed. Their expectation can become hope if they remember that even in sleep, through the sleep of their Lord, the promise of life and of salvation is fulfilled.

It is up to them, when the presence of their Lord seems silent, helpless, to wake Him up in order to wake their own selves up deep down, to awaken the awareness that love is always watching: "I sleep, but my heart watches" (Song 5:2). He is a Lord who is always present, whatever it may happen.

The messianic deed on the sea

And then He stood up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.

Jesus "stood up" / "rose up" is in the passive, linking raising and waking with the nuance of passivity, just like in 28:6, at the resurrection. He is made to rise. By the Father.

Here St Matthew is referring to a Messianic manifestation, in between the Old Testament one (cf Ps 89:9) and the great hope that the Living One accompanies the community along history and its turmoil.

The Lord rebukes / commands the winds and the sea. The verb used is 'epitimeo', which is used also when referring to exorcisms to drive out devils (cf 17:8). This

action brings a great calm. Everything is quiet now: from a great upheaval to a great calm. The sea and the winds obey Jesus. The sea, the symbol of evil, submits itself to the Lord. The verb 'hupakono' does not allow alternatives. It means submitting to whoever must be obeyed, with no possibility to choose otherwise.

"It happened..." The Lord's action has an impact on history, on concrete events, it is not an illusion. St Matthew's community is remembering the saving power of the death and resurrection of the Lord, of His messianic manifestation. They are remembering that He is present in history, that He is close to them when the waves seem to be swamping the boat, and when they discover it a great calm is brought about.

In fact, if we refer 'epitimaeus' to St Matthew's community herself, the rebuke is addressed not really to evil itself, which had already been overcome by Easter, but to their fear of being alone and to their little faith.

Conclusion

27 They were astounded and said, 'Whatever kind of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?'

But how can one increase his faith? Perhaps by believing that the Lord will put everything in order?

'Wonder' seems to be a first step conducive to growth. Growth does not come from the satisfaction of one's needs, but from wondering who that Man is.

These last verses broaden the horizon: the focus is no longer on the disciples, the protagonists of this episode, but on 'men' in general. The men were astounded. And wonder led them to encounter the Person in front of them.

Faith is focussed on the relationship with Jesus, on the gradual discovery of His Person, on the joy of His presence, on not being alone even when not everything is fine.

This emphasis is addressed to all readers: we must recover that gaze which makes us capable of being amazed by the constant presence of the Lord, who rules over evil and death too. And we will gain an attitude of trust and of entrustment.

Wonder comes to the fore, together with the attitude giving back to a discouraged and persecuted community, as well as to all those who doubt the effectiveness of the presence of the Lord, the trust allowing them to survive without 'miracle-ism'. Not thanks to expectations, but counting on hope, on the wonder deriving from the discovery that Love wakes even when He is asleep, that we are accompanied, supported and loved by the Lord. He does not let His disciples cross the sea on their own: He is there, always, and everything is subject to Him. He manifests Himself to His own, He condescends to their little faith, but invites them to grow.

2. Meditatio **(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)**

How do I relate with my fears? Do they lead me to hope, to trust in the fruitfulness of the Lord, in the steadfastness of His promise? Or do they become a sea by whose waves I am being swamped?

Even though we are full of fears (and the fear of becoming frightened too), we cannot always remain on the shore on the defensive: Do I dare to live?

The sea, with the Lord, can turn from a place of turmoil to a place of great calm. In the midst stands our growth in trust. Even our fears can be transformed and become the 'place' of Jesus' salvific deed for us.

“May we just be allowed to understand, through right discernment, the storms of tribulation and temptation, the storms of the high seas of our life! In them, God is near, not far: our God is on the Cross. The Cross is the sign through which false security is put to the test and faith in God is re-established.”
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

3. Oratio **(to pray the Word / to repeat it)**

*If you feel your faith is wavering due to the violence of the storm, calm down:
God is watching you.*

*If everything that passes falls into nothingness, and it is not restored, calm down:
God remains.*

*If your heart is agitated and in the grip of sadness, calm down:
God forgives.*

*If death scares you, and you fear the mystery and the shadow of the night's sleep,
calm down:*

God awakens.

God listens to us when nothing answers us;

He is with us, when we believe we are alone.

He loves us, even when it seems He is abandoning us.

(St Augustine)

4. Contemplatio **(to contemplate the Word / silence)**

Let us enter the mystery of the silent presence of the Lord. In the depths of ourselves He is dwelling without clamour, steadfast when on the surface, in the agitation of thoughts and feelings, He seems to have abandoned us. Let us contemplate Him as the Life of our lives.

5. Collatio

(to share the Word)

Let us share the fruit of our prayer on the Word, united by the same presence of the same Lord in each of us, as reflections of the same Face.