

19TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A (2026)

For those of us who live far from the coast, the sea might hold a mystic charm: the beach is, or was, the place for holidays, relaxation and fun; and those happy associations generally encourage a favourable, and even romantic, view of the sea itself. But coastal-dwellers, mariners, and those who make their living on the sea are far less whimsical: they know the sea's power, and potential for destruction; and, thus, they usually tend to treat the waters of the deep with a greater caution and respect than do we. Perhaps this is why we hear tragic stories of drownings more often during the summer months, as people who are not used to the sea fall victim to its unpredictability and power.

And, for the people of Jesus' day, the sea was not only afforded the utmost reverence, but it was also imbued with quasi-personal character: for it represented the *primaeval* chaos over which God had triumphed when creating the world; just as it was believed to be the proper abode of demons – rabbinic theology provided for both a fiery and a watery hell. And it is precisely because of these negative and infernal associations that the disciples were so terrified when Jesus appeared to them, walking on the choppy waters: they thought he was an apparition because they would have expected the sea to have produced such a manifestation of the demonic. But Jesus was no ghost: rather, he was the incarnate Son of God, whose ability to walk on the water demonstrated his divinity, in its power to control the created order.

But, just as much as today's Gospel reading is about the revelation of Jesus' divine nature; so, also, it is about the response of humanity, in faith, to him. Because, here, in his attempt to walk to Jesus on the water, S. Peter is everyman – the representative disciple and human being – whose confidence and confusion resonate with our own experience of the journey of faith. Here is a real, human story of fear, doubt, and restoration to which we can relate; and, so, this whole incident can be taken as a metaphor for our own lives, and for how we navigate the hinterland of tension between doubt and faith, as well as for how we respond to the storms of life, and the means by which God enables us to weather them. Because the reality is that Christian discipleship is as much defined by doubt as it is by faith; and what S. Peter teaches the follower of Jesus in every age is that, in the face of uncertainty, trouble and fear, what matters is not so much that we have lost trust, messed up or are afraid, but that we know upon whom we must call for redemption, reassurance and restoration. Because, though storms are inevitable, only Jesus can save us from being overwhelmed; only Jesus can restore in us that which is lost and tarnished, and resolve the conflicts and contradictions that so often cause us to rely on our own efforts, rather than on his grace.

And this is because, whether faith is strong or weak, and in whatever dangerous or frightening situations we might find ourselves, Jesus is an objective reality, and is always at hand, even when our faith falls short. So often we think and behave as if God's proximity and power to act in our lives is dependent on how firmly

we believe in him; likewise, our propensity to use him as the fourth emergency service when we get ourselves into a scrape derives from an immature and transactional understanding of God's relationship with his creation. No: the God who created order out of chaos, and has the power to subdue and walk on the waters of the deep, is also the God who knows us intimately, and stretches out his hand to us in human flesh of his Son, and asks us to trust him at all times, even when we are far from certain, even when we find it hard to believe.

And this is the difference between faith and belief: to believe is to contend that God exists, and to subscribe to certain doctrinal assertions; but to have faith is to trust that, whatever happens, and whatever dangers or pain may come our way, God loves us, and is always with us, in spite of how we feel or what others might say. Too often even we Christians allow ourselves to be influenced by the secular dogma that everything is defined by, and dependent upon, our personal experience and emotional state; and, consequently, we risk putting our trust in ourselves rather than in God. But God is, and defines, reality, truth, and prescribes our destiny; and to live as a mature Christian is to inhabit that reality, to trust that God is in control, and to live as those who wait expectantly for the Lord's salvation – even though that may come in the fourth watch of the night. Christians are not defined by fear, but by hope; and the confidence and peace that Jesus offers will only begin to transform us when we hear his words, 'Do not be afraid' not just as a reassurance, but also as a command. Amen.