
²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while He dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after He had dismissed the crowds, He went up the mountain by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning He came walking towards them on the lake. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' ²⁸ Peter answered Him, 'Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.' ²⁹ He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out His hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshipped Him, saying, 'Truly You are the Son of God.' Matthew 14:22-33

On 31st October, 2017, many Christians around the world will be remembering a significant event in the history of Christianity of the 'Western tradition', and that is Martin Luther posting his 95 Theses as a response to what he saw as a significant 'spiritual issue' in the life of 'the church'. To many people, this act is one of a 'radical monk' who wanted to 'tear down' the 'institutions' of 'the church'. Such is how many 'children' of 'protest' and 'anti-authoritarian era' wish to see Luther – as some sort of 'social revolutionary. But was this Luther's aim?

Certainly Luther wanted 'change'. And certainly Luther was reacting to the teaching of Johann Tetzel (Dominican friar and preacher, Grand Inquisitor of Heresy to Poland, and Grand Commissioner for indulgences in Germany). But Luther had been on a 'slow burn' for quite a while.

Twelve years prior to the posting of the 95 Theses, Luther had been caught in a thunderstorm (2nd July, 1505). He vowed to become a monk. He entered the strict monastery of St. Augustine at Erfurt. As Luther began this journey he plunged into prayer, fasting, and ascetic practices—going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold without a blanket, and flagellating himself. As he later commented, "If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I."

Luther was troubled. Luther was struggling with the need to confess completely everything he had ever done wrong. He wore out his father-confessor, Johann von Staupitz out, trying to remember every sin that his mind would try to cover up. On at least one occasion, he confessed for six hours straight.

Johann tried to explain God's grace to Luther. Surrender to the love of God, he counselled. Luther should lose himself in God, he said. He was making religion too difficult. All he needed to do was love God. But Luther was tormented by fears and doubts. "I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him!"

"I don't understand it!" replied the longsuffering Johann when Luther reported this latest line of reasoning to him. He reminded Luther that Christ died to remit our sins. However, Luther was so afraid of Christ, the judge, that he could not turn to Him for relief.

When Luther was ordered to take his doctorate in the Bible and become a professor at Wittenberg University, during lectures on the Psalms (in 1513 and 1514) and a study of the Book of Romans, he began to see a way through his dilemma. "At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I ... began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith... Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open." (Note: this is at least three years prior to the posting of the 97 Theses against Scholastic Theology, and the 95 Theses on the Power of Indulgences...)

What does it mean to 'have faith'?" This was Luther's concern. How does this 'faith' affect one's life? This was also Luther's concern.

In our Holy Gospel for this day we hear of Jesus' disciples caught in a storm in the middle of Lake Galilee. Now it is important to remember what had transpired earlier. Earlier in the day Jesus had received news of the death of John the Baptist. He had wanted to be alone but crowds had followed Him. Jesus healed the sick, and fed 5000. And according to the Gospel according to St. John (Chapter 6) the crowds wanted to make Jesus a 'king'. So Jesus 'constrains' (ἠναγκάσεν — literally, "compels" or "forces") the disciples into the boat. Maybe Jesus didn't want to the disciples to be swept up in the discussion that followed. Or maybe He simply wanted to 'be alone' with His heavenly Father in prayer. He certainly was alone for a while in prayer. It was around 3am that Jesus came toward the boat distressed (βασανιζομενον — like a man with demons Matthew 8:29) on the sea. And just as Jesus had 'immediately made the disciples get into the boat' He spoke to them and said,, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' Take heart – be of good cheer; be encouraged. Don't be afraid – fear not.

But in the middle stands a key phrase – ἐγώ εἰμι – 'It is I' or "I am" – the great Name of God. In biblical thought, only God walks on the sea (Job 9:8; 38:16; Ps 77:19; Isa 43:16; 51:9-10; Hab 3:5). Precisely in the midst of this story, Jesus does what only God can do, and speaks with the voice of God, "I am."

And then we have that incredible account of Peter getting out of the boat at Jesus' call and command and *beginning* to sink as he 'saw the wind'! And *immediately* Jesus reached out His hand and saved him.

What happened to Peter (the "Rock") with his little faith and his doubts? One answer is, "He sank into the sea." Another answer is, "He was saved by Jesus." For most of us whose faith is unable to move mountains and thus must be smaller than mustard seeds (see Mt 17:20); we are assured that even our microscopic faith is sufficient for salvation. But as one preacher has said, "The person of faith is the one who cries out to Jesus in time of need."

Now Jesus gets into the boat and the disciples 'worshipped Him' (an act belonging only to God), and they confessed 'Truly You are the Son of God'. In Matthew "Son of God" is usually spoken by Jesus' enemies: the Tempter (4:3, 6); demoniacs (8:92); the judging high priest (26:63) and the mockers (27:40, 43). Besides the positive confession by the centurion at Jesus' death, it is spoken by the disciples in our text and later by Peter at his confession, (16:16) which God had revealed to him. The proper confession of Jesus as "Son of God" comes at His death and through revelations of God. It is not something that the disciples (neither then nor now) come up with on their own.

Jesus isn't simply our guide or life coach; he's our Saviour, the One who does for us what we cannot. Too much of Christianity, I think, has forgotten that, reducing the gospel to one more spiritual self-help recipe, hardly different from what you might hear on many of the 'power of positive thinking' television shows. But the Lord who walks atop the sea in this story not only directs wind and wave but also death and life. This Jesus wants more than to command our attention; he wants to save our lives.

What does it mean to 'have faith in Jesus'? What if Peter's sin—if we can call it that—isn't that he doubted himself and his own abilities, but that he doubted that the figure walking toward him on the water was really Jesus? "Lord, if it is You," he said, "Ask me to come to You on the water."

In a recent movie, several Characters are about to embark on a dangerous journey. One of them, fearfully asks, "Is it safe?" The leader replies, simply, "No. Lets Go!" (Gimli: Certainty of death. Small chance of success. What are we waiting for?).

There is so much else we could focus on this day. Jesus' disciples were in the boat, and the place congregations sit in a church building is called 'the nave' (meaning boat), and how herein this place as we 'travel in the boat' we are fed by Jesus and receive His blessing to be 'lifeboats in the world'. We could reflect on the reality of miracles – and certainly our focus is on the greatest act of God in the defeat of death through the death and resurrection of Jesus. But today we explore the theme of 'faith in Jesus'.

And this has both a 'subjective' ('what I believe') and an 'objective' ('in whom I believe') side...

On the one hand we could say (1) Firstly, faith comes by hearing. Peter knowing Jesus voice ventured to speak to Him. Paul writes in Romans 10:17, Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. (2) By responding to Jesus, you begin to see how wonderful He is. Peter that he did not want to be left behind. (3) Faith does God's will. Notice that Peter said, 'Command me to go to You, Lord. But we would also say, faith is about looking to Jesus – who is The Son of God.

Luther's 'struggle of faith' was a result of introspection – focus on self. Luther had a 'false god' in his mind and heart – ultimately that 'false god' was his own self! As he learnt over time, to focus on Jesus Himself changes everything. The more one looks within oneself the more miserable one becomes. The more one looks at Jesus the greater the light will shine, and the more we can see ourselves as we truly are, and receive true joy for one's soul – for the joy comes not from within oneself, but from Jesus.

'Take courage. Don't be afraid. It is I, Jesus.' This is His Word to you. Amen.