

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	1 Kings 19:9A, 11-13A
<i>Response</i>	Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 85:9, 10, 11-12, 13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Peter Romans 9:1-5
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for his word.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 14:22-33

The 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the Gospel of Matthew, and it takes us to the very famous story of Jesus walking on water. It gives us Matthew's version of this story, which is also one of the longest accounts of the walking on the water, because it includes the famous story of Peter walking on water...for a little while before he starts to drown. So let's take a look at this account. We are in Matthew 14:22-33. We will begin with the Gospel and then as usual we will go back to the Old Testament and try to make some connections here. So Matthew 14:22-33 says this:

Then he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves; for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat,

the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."¹

Let's pause there. There is a lot going on in this very important passage from the Gospel of Matthew. We will try to walk through it step-by-step and look at several key points. Number one, it is important to recall the setting of this miracle. It takes place after the famous feeding of the 5000 in the Gospel of Matthew. So one of the reasons this is important to highlight is because the same sequence occurs in three of the four Gospels. So for example, in Matthew, Mark and in John, all those Gospels have accounts of the walking of Jesus on the water, and in all three that that account immediately follows the feeding of the 5000. So it's like a pair of miracles. Jesus feeds the 5000 and then he walks on the water. So it's in the wake of him having performed this amazing miracle of feeding 5000 people from five loaves and two fish, that Jesus then withdraws and he goes up the mountain to pray. So it gets late and then while he is up on the mountain praying, the disciples set off across the sea of Galilee in the boat.

Now a couple of elements about the context. Where exactly does this take place on the sea of Galilee? Well we don't have the exact location, but we do know that the sea of Galilee to this day is not a small lake. It is about 7 miles wide at its widest point, and it was the kind of beating heart of Galilee. It was a place of fishing and of industry, and the disciples knew it well. And when they're in their boat, this is important, the first thing you notice is that they are not right next to shore. It says they are many furlongs distant from the land. Now in John's account of this miracle he actually says they are about 4 miles from the shore. Matthew just says many furlongs, but the point is, number one, that they're not next to the shore. Sometimes you will have skeptics who are talking about the miracle who will make the claim that the disciples saw Jesus walking on the bank or something like that and they thought he was walking on the water, or they saw Jesus walking on a sandbar near the shore and they assumed he was walking on the water. No, they are in the middle of the lake in the middle of the night and by the way, the disciples were fishermen so I think they knew the difference between walking on water and

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

walking on a sandbar. I am sorry, it is just frustrating sometimes the things people add into the text. That is eisegesis, reading into the text. The text is very clear that they are in the middle of the water, they are far from the shore.

Also notice the time, it's the fourth watch of the night. So this is in the middle of the night, sometime between 3 o'clock and 6 o'clock in the morning. Now most of us wouldn't get on a boat and be out in the middle of the night between 3 and 6 AM, but for the Apostles they were pretty used to this because as fishermen it was actually customary to fish at night. We see that in the Gospel of John, that they spent all night fishing and they don't catch anything. So they are traveling in the middle of night, something they are pretty used to. What they are not used to, however, is being on the water in the middle of the night, in the middle of the lake, and seeing a man coming out to them walking on the waves of the sea. And that's what Jesus does here in this account, he comes to them walking on the sea. Now when they experience this, their first reaction is fear and they assume that he is a ghost. That is a pretty interesting point there because it shows us that apparently at least some of the disciples believed in ghosts — you can also translate this as spirit. So they don't think that this is a normal human being coming to them on the water. Jesus says something very interesting, he says “take heart...don't be afraid.” Now pause there for a second. This is a clue to us that we should characterize this account of Jesus walking on the water as a theophany. A theophany, as I have mentioned in other videos, is an appearance of God. It is where God reveals his power, glory and presence to his people on earth; and one of the things you will see over and over again in accounts of theophanies in the Bible, is that people are always afraid. When they see God, they're afraid; and God's response to their fear is often to quell it, to say “be calm, don't be afraid,” and then to speak to them, to give them some message.

So in this case Jesus says “take heart...have no fear,” and then he says “it is I.” Now the literal Greek behind that expression which most Bibles render “it is I,” is *egō eimi*, which literally in Greek means “take heart, *I am*.” It is not quite the same thing as “it is me.” Literally, it just says “take heart, I am.” Now on the one hand, the expression “I am”, *egō eimi*, can be used to identify someone. So if I asked you a question “is it you?” And you say “I am,” you could respond by saying “yes, it's me.” So that can be the sense or the meaning of it. But the literal meaning of the word in context is more than that. Jesus isn't just identifying

himself, he's also taking the divine name of God from the Old Testament and using it as his own. So in other words, he is alluding to the most famous theophany in the Bible, the theophany, the appearance of God to Moses on Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus 3. So in that theophany God comes to Moses and he calls Moses to go to the people of Israel, who were slaves in Egypt, and to set them free and to bring a message of deliverance. And Moses says well “if I go to them whose name shall I give them? What name will I tell them is the name of the God who sent me?” And the Lord says to Moses “I am who I am. Tell them I am has sent you to them...This is my name for all generations” God goes on to say. So the expression “I Am” is more than just an identification, it is the divine name. So when you take Jesus' use of the term “I Am,” you couple it with the fact that he is walking on water and that he's saying “don't be afraid” — which is standard theophany language from the Old Testament — those three things together show us that Jesus is revealing his divinity, that he's revealing that he is not just fully human, he is also divine.

I bring this up because it's one of those points where skeptics will say “how can we know that Jesus of Nazareth actually claimed to be divine? If you look at the Gospels, the only Gospel where he explicitly claimed to be divine is the Gospel of John, where he says ‘I and the Father are one’ in John 10, or ‘before Abraham was, I am’ in John 8. Jesus never claims to be divine in the synoptic Gospels.” Well nothing could be further from the truth. The walking on water is one of the most explicit accounts of Jesus's revelation of his divinity because he says to the Apostles “take heart, I am.” So just as in the Gospel of John, when Jesus wants to reveal his divinity he says “before Abraham was, I am [*egō eimi*] (John 8:58), so too in the synoptic Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus wants to reveal his divinity he doesn't say “hey everybody, I am God,” he says “take heart, I am [*egō eimi*],” he reveals his divinity. Now sometimes skeptics will also say “well all he's saying here is it is me, he is just identifying himself.” I won't deny that he's identifying himself, that is clear in the story because Peter is going to go on to say “Lord if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.” So there is some question here about whether it's him or not because they think it's a ghost. But he isn't just identifying himself because he is using the divine name in the context of walking on water, it is in the context of a miracle of divine power. That's the point here. So it's both a display of his power and a revelation of his divinity. He can take the name of God as his own because he is God, but come as man.

Now, most of the Gospel accounts end there, but Matthew gives us something important. He gives us an additional episode. He is the Gospel who tells us that not only did Jesus walk on the water, but he invited Peter to come and walk on the water as well. So in this context, Matthew went on to give an account of Peter walking on the sea where he said “Lord, if it's you, let me come to you on the water.” So Jesus tells him to “come,” and sure enough this is a classic example, by the way, of impetuous Peter. Peter is always sticking his foot in his mouth, saying the wrong thing and kind of acting before he thinks. So Peter says “if it is really you, let me come and I will walk on the water too.” He wants to share in that. Just like he will say elsewhere, “everyone else might abandon you, but I'll go to Jerusalem with you, I will die for you.” So Peter often over estimates his own power, his own faith, and so Jesus says to him “come to me.” So Peter gets out of the boat and sure enough he actually does walk on the water, and he walks far enough to actually get to Jesus. But then it says that “when Peter sees the wind, he gets to be afraid.” In other words, when he takes his eyes off of Jesus and begins to look at the storm and the wind that's raging around him, that's when his faith starts to shrink, that's when his faith starts to fail and he starts to sink into the water. And so he cries out “Lord, save me.” And Jesus reaches out his hand, catches him and says these powerful words, he says “oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

These are really powerful words from Jesus there. I don't know about you, but I would think that Peter's faith was pretty great when you think about the fact that he made it from the boat all the way to Jesus before he started to sink. So he did believe, but even though he was able to believe enough to walk on water, his faith was still small. It was too small for him to remain there in the face of the storm raging about him, in the face of the wind blowing all about him. So what was Peter's problem? He began to doubt, and when he began to doubt he began to sink and Jesus had to save him from that and take him into the boat. And when he took him into the boat, notice what happens, the wind stopped, the storm ceased, the sea became calm. And once the Apostles see that, notice their response, this is very important, “those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”

There are two elements there that are important to highlight. First, notice their response, when they see Jesus not just walk on water, but calm the storm, they fall on their knees. The Greek word here is *proskyneō*, it literally means to get down prostrate, they prostrated themselves before him. And it is true that that word can be used to describe the kind of veneration and honor that would be given to kings, for example, like in the pagan world. But if you look at the Gospel of Matthew, this is important, the word *proskyneō*, to worship or to fall prostrate, is only ever used for the kind of worship that you give to God and to God alone. Exhibit A here is from Matthew 4, the famous account of Jesus's temptation by the devil in the desert. You might recall that in that account the devil says to Jesus “I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world if you simply bow down and worship me,” *proskyneō*, same word. And Jesus's response is to quote the Scriptures and say “the Lord is God, him alone shall you serve.” In other words, him alone shall you worship. So when the devil asked Jesus to worship him, Jesus says “no, you can only worship God alone” in Matthew 4. By the time you get to Matthew 14 though, the Apostles fall down and worship Jesus and what is Jesus' response to that? Does he say “no, no, no, guys, you have me all wrong. I am just the Messiah. I am just the king of Israel. I am just a prophet. I'm just a great rabbi. I'm just a great teacher.” Does he deny the worship that they give to him? No. He accepts it and he also accepts their title, their confession of faith that they join to their worship. When they're on their faces they say “truly you are the Son of God.”

Now in a first century Jewish context, it is true that the expression Son of God was something that could be used for the King. So for example, in Psalm 2 or 2 Samuel 7, the son of David, the king of Israel, would be also referred to as the son of God, the adopted son of God. By virtue of his coronation as King, the King would become the adopted son of God and the ruler of the people. So son of God was an expression to use for the royal son of God, the King of Israel. But in the context of them falling on their face and worshipping him, they clearly mean something more than just “you're the Messiah.” They also seem to be worshipping him as if he's a divine king, as if he's the divine Messiah, as if he is the divine Son of God. And that's your final clue here that this is a theophany, that this is a revelation of Jesus' divinity. He is not only fully human, he is also fully divine. You might also call it a Christophany, a revelation of his identity as the Christ, the Messiah, the divine Son of God. This is a fantastic story from the New Testament, a fantastic account of this miracle in Matthew's Gospel.

Now in order to corroborate or confirm what I'm suggesting here about the miracle being a theophany, all we need to do is go back to the Old Testament and look at the reading that the Church has selected for the first reading. In this case, surprise, surprise, the first reading is also a theophany. It is the account of God's appearance to Elijah on Mount Sinai. This is in 1 Kings 19:9, 11-13. This is a pretty famous story too, the lectionary gives us the story on more than one occasion, but here it's coupling it with the account of Jesus walking on the water, so let's highlight some elements that are important for that. 1 Kings 19:9 says:

And there he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Eli'jah?" And he said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Eli'jah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

So what is going on in this first reading? A couple of quick points about the context. First and foremost, the broader context of the story is Elijah's flight from the wicked Queen Jezebel. Jezebel was an ancient queen of Israel and she was a wicked queen. She was completely opposed, especially to Elijah and to the prophets of God, and she had many of them slaughtered. So Elijah flees from the land of Israel and he goes down to Sinai, he goes down to Mount Sinai, the very mountain where God had appeared to Moses in the deserts of Sinai. So the second part of the context that is important, is what mountain he's on. He is in a cave on the mountain of Moses. So that already is a clue to you that when the book of Kings says that "the Lord passed by," it is describing a theophany. When the book of Kings uses the expression the "Lord passed by," it means that he appeared to him, that he visited Elijah, that he came down from heaven to be with Elijah. There is a cajun expression, cajun people will say "I'll make a pass by your house." What does that mean? It means I want to come and visit you. It actually has the

same kind of connotation in Hebrew. When the Lord passed by, he visits Elijah, he appears to him in a theophany.

Now, this theophany is a little interesting though because God comes to visit Elijah not in the ways that you might expect. So there is a strong wind, but God is not in the wind. There is an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. There is fire that appears. We are not sure exactly what that meant, it might have meant that lightning strikes or something like that, or it might mean something like the supernatural fire of the glory cloud in the Old Testament, or the fire that consumed the burning bush on Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus. You have all these visible manifestations, but interestingly the book of Kings says that God wasn't in any of those visible manifestations. Rather, he appeared to Elijah in a still, small voice. The New American Bible has here “a tiny, whispering sound.” Either one of those translations works, although the Hebrew there is the word *qōl*, which can mean sound, but frequently means voice. It's the voice of the Lord, but it is like a whispering voice. It is in the quiet, it's in the stillness that God manifests himself, that he passes by Elijah. Now notice this, even though God comes to him in that intimacy, Elijah knows that he cannot look upon God. He can't see the face of God and live, that's a basic Old Testament teaching. So when comes out of the cave to encounter God, he wraps his cloak, he wraps his mantle around his face and he goes out to meet the Lord.

So what's going on here? Why is this passage chosen as the Old Testament reading for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time? Well because it's like in anticipation of what's going to happen in the New Testament. Just as God appears on occasion to his prophets and his people, his chosen people in the Old Testament in the form of theophanies, so too Christ is now going to reveal God to his people, to the apostles, in the Christophanies of the New Testament. He's going to show his power over the wind and the waves and the sea when he walks on the water and takes the divine name as his own. And the bridge here between the Old Testament and the New Testament is the Responsorial Psalm, which is really focused on the coming of God to his people in order to save them. The refrain is “Lord, grant us your salvation.” It says that his salvation is “at hand for those who fear him.” What does that mean? Well it means those who stand in awe of him, who give him the reverence that is his due. Sometimes modern people are offended by the idea of the fear of the Lord. They will say things like “well I shouldn't be afraid of God. Why

should I be afraid of God? Isn't he my father? Doesn't he love me?" And the answer is yes, he's your father, and yes, he loves you. But he is also the creator of the whole universe and he is also all-powerful and omnipotent, and all mysterious, and it's fitting for us to do reverence and to have a rightly ordered awe or fear of God, respect for God's holiness, respect for his presence. So Elijah shows the fear of the Lord when he wraps the mantel around his face. The Apostles show the appropriate fear of the Lord when they recognize the divinity of Jesus and what do they do? They fall prostrate before him on their face and worship him.

And that's one of things we do at Mass. Hopefully we cultivate that kind of reverence, that fear of the Lord, when we come into the presence of Jesus Christ in the sanctuary, and especially in the Eucharist. One of the Catholic customs that we have, that goes back many many centuries, is the custom of bowing before the Blessed Sacrament, or genuflecting before the Blessed Sacrament. So when you enter into a Church, it's customary to find where Jesus is, where the Blessed Sacrament, where the tabernacle is, and then to genuflect, to bow one knee before Jesus. Why do we do that? Well it is not just a custom, it's a way of showing the fear of the Lord, it is a way of expressing reverence for his presence among us. So just like the Apostles, once they realized at this moment that Jesus was the divine son of God, they fell on their faces before him, so too, we, when we enter into a Catholic Church, when we enter into a Catholic sanctuary, are coming into the presence, the true presence in the Eucharist, of Jesus' body, blood, soul and divinity. So it's fitting that we would kneel before the God-man, before the Son of God made man who is truly present in the Eucharist, because he's no less present in the tabernacle than he was before the disciples on that day when he and Peter walked on water. So in a sense, every Mass is a kind of theophany, every Mass is an appearance of God coming to us in Jesus Christ, the son of God made man, fully human and fully divine.