

**9TH SUNDAY AFTER PRENTECOST
JULY 16/29, 2007**

I CORINTHIANS 3: 9-17

ST. MATTHEW 14: 22-34

Fr. Dr. Photios+ (W)

Gospel *And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away. And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone. But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased. Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God. And when they were gone over, they came into the land of Gennesaret.*

The Lord Sends His Disciples Ahead Whilst He Prays

Christ had sent the multitudes away and gone to the mountain to pray. This instructs us that “retirement and solitude are good when we wish to converse with God”. He often went overnight to pray in the wilderness. The wilderness comforts us providing silence and solitude for our praying. It is the “mother of silence; it is a calm and a harbour, delivering us and freeing us from all turmoils and cares”.¹

Jesus prayed for us since He had no need for anything. After all, He created everything. How could He be in need? He could not.² Christ prayed until evening to show that we

should not approach our prayers lazily, with indifference but have “patience and persevere”.³

He prayed on into the evening, teaching us not to cease praying after a short time, and also to pray especially at night, for it is very quiet then.⁴

Christ Sets Up A ‘Trial’ For His Disciples: The Rescue

The disciples had ‘sailed’ away toward the other side. Jesus had set up this trial for them, to test their spiritual mettle, to see how deeply their faith ran. He prayed alone on the mountain as they were pummeled to and fro by the buffeting winds of the storm. Their boat was in the middle of the sea, by design of the Lord to further challenge their faith.⁵ He increases their anxiety and fear by not simply ending the ferocious storm, and then coming to them only in the fourth watch of the night:

The night was divided into four parts by soldiers who stood guard in shifts, each ‘watch’ lasting three hours. So then, sometime after the ninth hour of the night, the Lord appeared to them as God, walking on the water.⁶

By delaying saving them, Christ teaches them (and us) “not to seek immediate deliverance from cruel and grievous afflictions, but to bear all occurrences bravely and manfully”.⁷ He also wanted them to recall that He had previously saved them whilst on the sea by His word alone. It was late into the night when He exercised His divine power:

Thus, it was after the ninth hour of the night when Christ came to the disciples, walking on the sea, as One Who walks upon the wings of the winds.. The sea stretched itself out before Him (like a carpet) for God, and He walked above the water, that the disciples would understand to Whom they should lift up their eyes, and from whence they should ask for help in every need and trial; moreover, that they might know that their Master could work miracles at sea as on land.⁸

They didn’t recognise Him at first, but His words dispelled their fear and “caused them to take heart”. By saying *Be of good cheer, it is I*, He is testing their faith to do away with their doubts and fear. He is reminding them that He **is** the Creator,⁹ and He had saved them once before (St. Mark 4: 39).¹⁰

The Impetuous Peter Is Humbled By His Weakening In Faith

Peter was the impetuous one of the disciples. Here he wanted to be near to Christ because he loved Him. Not only does He believe Christ walks on water, but he thinks that Jesus also will grant him this power. The Lord said *Come* and Peter actually began walking on the water to go to Him. He wasn’t afraid of the water, but he was fearful of

“the lesser peril, the wind”. Immediately upon his becoming afraid of the wind, he commenced sinking **because** his faith had lessened. Jesus allowed this to occur for a purpose:

The Lord did this so that Peter would not become puffed up, and to console the other disciples who perhaps envied him. Whereupon Christ also showed how much greater He was than Peter.¹¹

As long as Peter had faith and believed in Christ, the sea supported him. As soon as he registered doubt due to the strength of the wind, he began sinking. But when he cried out *Lord, save me*, his unbelief was healed. See, the cause of his sinking was his faintheartedness.¹² Christ admonishes Peter not the sea for “his pusillanimity and lack of faith”, *O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?* When we are strong in our faith, none of any evils falling on us can harm us. Christ left him to drown in his failure of faith, but then saved him from it. Later, Peter was to deny the Lord but be allowed to repent and convert. So, this episode at sea is a foreshadowing of Peter’s “future denial, repentance and conversion”.¹³

All In The Boat Were Delivered from Fear

Not only Peter was delivered from his fear, also everyone in the boat (ship). They had trouble recognising Jesus, but then the wind died down and ceased. Seeing that He commanded the winds and conquered the depths of the sea by walking on (over) the water, “they confessed His Divinity and worshipped Him as God”.¹⁴

They that were in the ship, as it is written, came and worshipped Him, saying, Of a truth Thou art the Son of God. Thus was the Lord leading all gradually to a higher understanding. By (His) walking on the sea, and commanding Peter to do so, and saving him from danger, (the disciples’) faith was henceforth greater. Earlier He had rebuked the sea; now He did not rebuke it, but He demonstrated in another way even greater power; wherefore they said, Of a truth, Thou art the Son of God.¹⁵

An Alternate (spiritual-allegorical) Meaning

Bl. Theophylact poses a “spiritual meaning of the miracle”:

The boat is the earth; the waves, man’s life that is troubled by evil spirits; the night is ignorance. In the fourth watch, that is, at the end of the ages, Christ appeared. The first watch was the covenant with Abraham; the second, the law of Moses; the third, the prophets; and the fourth, the coming of Christ.¹⁶

Notice that Christ did not chastise them when they referred to Him as the Son of God; “rather, He **accepted and confirmed** (emphasis supplied) their words”. And when they crossed over into the land of the Gennesaret, the people showed “fervent faith” and many who came to Him were healed.¹⁷

Let us finish focusing on Peter’s words, *Lord, save me*. That’s what we need to say, and Christ “will also stretch out His hand and grant us complete calm”.¹⁸ We must keep faith at the forefront of our minds. Be strong in it, try to avoid faintheartedness, keep our eyes on what is not of this world, not on secular things. The sea of our lives rolls before us. Spiritual opportunity lies ahead. Never look back. Repent and go forward resolutely, praying unceasingly for Christ and asking Him to come into our ship, our hearts:

And if we are willing to receive Christ into our ship; that is, to have Him dwell in our hearts; we shall immediately find ourselves at the land to which we are hastening. What land is that? Clearly, it is the promised land, heaven, the land of the meek, or them that refrain from every evil¹⁹

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ *The Gospel Commentary (Lessons Taken from the Holy Gospel and from Many of the Divine Writings of Our Father among the Saints, John Chrysostom)* (translated from the Slavonic into English by Hieromonk German Ciuba), Russian Orthodox Church of the Nativity of Christ (Old Rite), Erie, Pennsylvania, 2002, pp. 340-341.

² *ibid.*, p. 341.

³ *id.*

⁴ Blessed Theophylact, *Explanations of the Holy Gospel of St. Matthew, Vol. I*, (translated from the original Greek by Fr. Christopher Stade) Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 1997, p. 126.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *id.*

⁷ *The Gospel Commentary, op. cit.*, p. 342.

⁸ *id.*, p. 343.

⁹ *id.*, p. 344.

¹⁰ *id.*, pp. 344-345.

¹¹ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

¹² *id.*

¹³ *The Gospel Commentary, op. cit.*, pp. 346-347.

¹⁴ *id.*, pp. 347-348.

¹⁵ *id.*, p. 348.

¹⁶ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-128.

¹⁷ *id.*, p. 128 and see *The Gospel Commentary, op. cit.*, p. 348.

¹⁸ *id.*, p. 349.

¹⁹ *id.*, p. 350.