

Steering in the Storm

My first parish was near the shore of the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. Boats were all over the place. Not having a boating background, I had a lot to learn. My wife knew how to operate small sailboats, but we had never done that together more than once, and on the occasion I had made a hopeless tangle of everything I touched. Like most landlubbers, I had no idea how to do the simplest things on the water. Steering, for example. If you look at the water right in front of the boat, you swerve all over the place. You have to learn to pick a distant mark, on the shore or the horizon, something fairly far away, to use as a visual reference point. Then you can steer smoothly over open water.

To steer through life, we need to know how to pay proper attention.

Today's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew is about precisely that. In our experience, Jesus does not always seem visible or even nearby, and even when he seems close, there tend to be many distractions. In the famous story, Jesus appears at night during a storm at sea. It looks like it's a story about how God is available to us in emergencies. But we all know that not all sinking ships are miraculously kept safe, in spite of fervent prayers for rescue. That's an issue for another sermon. This story is more a symbol of the constant storm of life and how we get distracted from God. The normal challenge in the life of faith – the very routine yet very serious challenge is to pay effective attention to Jesus.

In the New Testament, Peter often looks like a dolt, or at least a hothead. He does seem to have a thick head and a streak of rashness. But as we contemplate the story of his attempt to walk through a storm to Jesus, we should not single him out for ridicule, even gentle, good humored ridicule. Peter's failure – his sinking below the waves in a moment of distraction – is our failure. His story is our story.

When I speak (as I often do) of acquiring the habit of more or less constantly paying attention to God, I'm not talking about how to get through a quiet, contemplative life. I'm talking about walking through a storm. If you ask even those monks and nuns who have chosen to live as quietly as possible in monasteries, they'll say the same: the world is a storm, be the flowers never so jolly in the gentle morning sun. Prayer, the study of holy things (especially Scripture), and Godly conversation are not nice hobbies for a spare moment; they are basic survival tactics. I have fought some of my worst spiritual battles in the quiet of the night, in a safe bed in a safe house surrounded by people and animals who cared about me. The danger never, ever goes away, because it is part of the brokenness of the world in general and of the human condition in particular. God is working on it, but he works amidst the storm, as we do, having chosen to heal his creation from within, to regenerate it, rather than obliterate it and build something different. We are called to act according to his example.

Now, this is quite doable. Whatever the circumstances, God is responsive to even our most inarticulate gesture in his direction. Jesus is never far away. He is the companion at our shoulder, or he is the leader a few steps ahead, showing the way. The Holy Spirit is the rescue ship alongside the foundering vessel of our life, bringing hope amidst the storm, a source of comfort and strength deep in our heart. Our Heavenly Father is the sturdy, steady backup that will not countenance the ultimate destruction of any good thing – though all things will be transformed.

And when the rain lashes us, when the wind howls and we are drenched in grief and pain, awash with fear and danger, overwhelmed by the darkness and the tumult of it all ---

We remember: We are already drenched, already soaked, already dead and raised to everlasting life. That's what God's grace is, most strongly demonstrated in baptism: it is the anti-chaos, the storm of light and glory, the strong hand lifting us up just as the waves are about to close over our head.

There, already, is rescue. There, already, is new life.

We just need to learn to keep paying attention. And who knows, the next hand to lift a sinking soul to glory may be our own.