

Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time

In 64AD a fire burnt to the ground something like a third of the city of Rome. Fires were common enough because of the primitive methods of heating which were used at that time, but this was a catastrophe. It seems that Nero, the emperor, not only failed to make any attempts to contain the conflagration, but also encouraged its spread. It created the empty space for him to establish an artificial lake and built a luxurious palace surrounded by a large park for his own personal enjoyment.

To distract the populace, and to give them an object on which to vent their anger, he put the blame on the small Christian community. They had no legal protection, and, since they were known to avoid social occasions which required involvement in cult of the Roman gods, they were thought of as atheists, and the general populace found it easy to imagine them to be quite capable of any kind of anti-social behaviour.

Many Christians were crucified and then set alight for the entertainment of the crowd. Tradition has it that both Peter and Paul were among the victims of this persecution. Tradition also tells us that Mark's gospel, part of which we read in this mass, was written about this time, and that it draws heavily on Peter's memoirs.

This morning's gospel uses traditional imagery to depict a community that has come together in order to journey to a destination that is 'across on the other side', and that has come up against insuperable opposition. It is in danger of going under and being utterly destroyed. Mark is reminding the members of the persecuted community that Jesus is truly present among them, though he seems asleep. He is encouraging them to cry out to God in their distress, and to believe that Jesus, in whom they have placed their trust, will calm the storm, and will bring them safely to the haven for which they long. Jesus' first disciples had often been in similar situations, depicted here symbolically as a storm at sea. Just as Jesus had brought them through trials and persecution, so he would continue to look after those who believed in him. The Church is Peter's boat. Christ is present with us. The port for which we are heading is not of this world. It is perfect communion with God to be experienced on the other side of death. Even if we die, says Mark, we will live with him. Let us not lose heart.

The lesson on which I would like to focus with you is that turbulence in our life is not always, and not necessarily, a bad thing, and that it can, as in today's gospel, be an occasion for grace. Let us imagine our life as a sea-crossing. We are in a boat. We have a fair idea of our destination. At least we know that we have to 'cross to the other side'. We might even half-think that if we row steadily enough we will make it. We are with those we trust, and Jesus is in the boat with us, so everything should go fine. For a while it does. But then we hit a storm.

It might be a physical accident. It might be a moral collapse. It might be when someone we love tells us that he or she doesn't love us any more. It might be the loss, physical or emotional, of a child. It might be a nervous breakdown or the onslaught of depression. Whatever it is, it is terrible. Our whole world is collapsing and we are certain that we are going under.

Our first temptation, perhaps, is to want to turn back. We wonder whether the destination is real or worth the struggle. Our faith tells us to hold on. Paul assures us that 'what God has

prepared for those who love him' is something that far exceeds anything that 'eye has seen, or ear heard, or heart imagined' (1Corinthians 2:9). We are not to lose heart when faced with trials. The great Saint Augustine writes: 'Our pilgrim life here on earth cannot be without trial and temptation, for it is through trials that we make progress, and it is only by being tested that we *come to know ourselves*'(Augustine, On Psalm 60, 2-3).

The key lesson that we learn in trials such as are dramatically depicted in today's gospel is that all the rowing in the world will never get us to our destination. We are forced to face up to our own weakness. Before the trial hit us we were pretty self-confident and self-reliant. We knew that Jesus was with us, but we didn't recognise our real need for his help. We were so occupied with what we were doing that we forgot that we could not reach the destination on our own, and we forgot the danger we were in. We were too busy to pray. Too busy to seek spiritual help. We had lost touch with our heart and with the heart of God.

This is expressed very powerfully in the Japanese language. They have a kanji made up of two characters to represent the expression 'too busy': one is the character for 'heart', and the other is the character for 'destruction'. To be 'too busy' is to cause 'heart-destruction'. How true that is, and how often we are destroying our own and other people's hearts because we are too busy. Then a trial comes into our lives, and we have to face the fact that we cannot cope. Now, faith becomes something very real for us. If we want to reach that communion with God for which our heart longs we will have to wake up, get in touch once again with our heart, and listen to it as it cries out to God in its distress. Let us listen again to Saint Augustine: 'Return to the heart! Why are you running away from yourselves? Why are you getting lost, outside yourselves, entering on deserted ways? You are wandering aimlessly. Come back! To where? To the Lord! It can be done without delay! Return immediately to your heart! Exiled from your own self you wander outside. You fail to know yourself, you who want to know the source of your existence. Come back! Return to the heart ... See there what you can learn about God, for the image of God is there. In your heart dwells Christ. In your heart you are being renewed after God's image'(Tract on John 18.10.1).

We cannot make it on our own, but we are not on our own. God is with us in the boat, even though it may appear that he is asleep and not listening to us. Our world may appear to be collapsing, but what Saint Paul tells us is true: 'Nothing in the whole of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'(Romans 8:39).

If you have been through an experience such as I have described, I am sure that when the calm came you began to look at your journey differently. If it is God's grace, and only God's grace, that can get us through, then we better start looking again at our destination. It is, to borrow Mark's dramatic words: 'across the other side'. So we had better start looking more to him to guide us as we row. We had better listen carefully to him. Perhaps it was not Jesus who was asleep after all. Perhaps we were the ones who were so caught up in our own activity that we failed to consult him, failed to listen to him.

Jesus really is present to us, in the very centre of our hearts, as we journey. When things are too much for us, let us cry out to him in our distress. He will certainly hear us. Another Saint, Elizabeth of the Trinity, has this to say: 'It seems to me that the weakest soul – even if it is the most guilty – is just the one that has the best grounds for hope, and this act by which it forgets

itself, to throw itself into the arms of God, glorifies him more and gives him more joy than all the falling back upon self, and all the self-examination that makes it live in its wretchedness, while in its centre it possesses a Saviour who comes at every moment to cleanse it.'

And Paul writes these consoling words: 'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it'(1Corinthians 10:13).

It may be that the cup will not go away. Like Jesus we may have to endure the crucifixion. The storm may continue to rage about us. But on the cross Jesus experienced a profound inner calm and peace. That gift God offers us. Let us believe that Jesus is with us. Let us cry out to him in our distress, and let us trust that, moment by moment, we will receive the grace to remain faithful to love. If we die with him, we will rise with him to an eternity of glory. In the words of Saint Teresa of Avila: 'Let nothing disturb you / Let nothing cause you to fear. All is passing / God never changes / Patience gains all. Whoever has God wants for nothing / God alone suffices.'