

19th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

Today I offer 2 homilies as it is also the close of a week dedicated to God's call (vocation). The second homily focuses on the call to consecrated life and to the priesthood.

Homily 1

Today's Gospel takes us to the very heart of our Christian faith. How often we find ourselves unable to cope. Everything around us is crashing in on us and we feel we are being overwhelmed. We are afraid and when we pray, God seems to be far away. There is no answer. That is the situation of the apostles in the boat out on the lake.

Matthew presents this portrait for his community which was in a similar situation. Refugees were pouring in from Judea, trying to escape the war with the occupying Roman army. As Jews who had joined the Christian community, they were being accused of failing to support the Jewish cause. Jesus had taught them to forgive and to work for peace, and now, over and above the terrible Roman-Jewish war, their fellow Jews and members of their own family were turning against them. Incidentally, some of the pain of this is expressed in today's beautiful Second Reading in which Paul expresses the suffering he experienced because of his fellow Jews who did not open their minds and hearts to Jesus and to the community of Jesus' disciples who were experiencing the fulfilment of the dreams and hopes of Israel.

Some of us who have had to flee our homes and find ourselves here in Australia at the other end of the world can relate to these feelings. Many of us have experienced situations that leave us just as bewildered and just as frightened.

Matthew's church felt the absence of Jesus acutely. Matthew is asking his community to believe that even though Jesus is no longer with them in the way he was before his death, he is in intimate communion with God (we see him in prayer on the mountain while they are battling the storm) and therefore he knows what they are going through. He is praying for them and cares for them and will save them. Just as God led his chosen people through the Red Sea, so Jesus will see that they make it through to the Promised Land. We are being reminded in this dramatic scene that even though we may seem to be getting nowhere and look like being overwhelmed, we will be safe if we do not lose faith in Jesus.

The Jesus portrayed in this scene is the incarnation of Yahweh the Redeeming God of the Exodus. This is clear from the words he uses: 'It is I; do not be afraid'. 'It is I' is the translation of the divine name, Yahweh. In the words of Paul: 'In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2Corinthians 5:19). In Jesus God is redeeming us. In Jesus we see God mastering the waters of chaos (Psalm 77:19; Job 9:8; 38:16; Sirach 24:5-6).

What happens to Peter shows us that a disciple too can also rise above the surrounding chaos. Peter left his nets to follow Jesus. Now he must walk towards Jesus across the water. He knows that he can do so, however, only if invited by Jesus, and so he cries out: 'If it is you, tell me to come to you across the water'. Jesus' response is so simple, so trusting and so encouraging. He

simply says: 'Come'. On Jesus' invitation, Peter leaves the boat. Matthew shows him as starting to walk toward Jesus on the water. However, instead of keeping his heart and his eyes on Jesus, he notices the danger and loses heart. I'm sure we all know that feeling. Now let us watch carefully. What does Peter do when he loses courage? In his distress, he cries to the Lord and immediately Jesus reaches out and holds him. Matthew is telling us that of course Jesus will not let us go under. The waves are real and the boat is threatened, but Jesus, our Saviour, is calling to us and will receive us if we cry to him and allow him to hold us.

We are reminded of the cry of the psalmist: 'He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters'(Psalm 18:16). 'Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God'(Psalm 69:1-3).

Matthew's vivid portrayal of the struggling community and the divine Jesus coming to its rescue reminds us of the following passage, taken from the Isaiah scroll: 'Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you'(Isaiah 43:1-2).

A further reflection is inspired by the fact that the disciples set out in daylight, and Jesus comes to them only in the last hours of darkness, just before dawn. The impression one has is that he brings the light with him, as well as enabling them to reach the shore, but only after they have battled the seas in the dark all night.

We often wonder why God does not seem to be hearing our cry. We are asked to believe that there is a divine wisdom in the timing of grace, and it seems that we all must go through the dark night to make us realise that we are totally incapable of reaching our destination on our own, as we are quite incapable on our own of letting go and admitting our own powerlessness. There seems to be no other way to learn this lesson, except to be made to face the darkness feeling utterly alone. If we are willing to dare this journey into the night, God will not release us from it till our entire being cries out for that release and recognises that God alone can save us.

Greater than the fear of being overwhelmed by the storm is the feeling of awe that comes over Peter as he dares to believe that Jesus is there to save him. It is this same awe that is experienced by Elijah in today's First Reading. We are meant to sense our smallness and the fragile hold which we have on existence. But we are also meant to sense the immensity of God and the awesome nature of God's personal care for us. This is what the Bible means by 'Fear of the Lord' – perhaps better translated 'Fear from the Lord', for it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It truly is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10), and today's Responsorial Psalm reminds us that God's help is there for those who 'hope in God's steadfast love'(Psalm 33:18); who delight in God's commands (Psalm 112:1).

Let us reach out to this God. Don't let our expectations narrow our vision. Elijah expected God in the storm, and the fire and the earthquake. He was wrong. God came to him in silence. When everything is crashing in on us, let us cry out to him: 'If you are there tell me and I will come to

you across the water.’ Don’t leave the boat till he calls, but when he calls let us go to him, keeping our eyes on him, trusting in his love. When God’s love meets human faith, they embrace - and it is in this embrace that our troubled hearts experience peace. All these ideas are expressed beautifully in today’s Responsorial Psalm. I can think of no suggestion better than that you take time out. Go like Elijah to the mountain, cover your head with a veil of silence and slowly read Psalm 85, line by line, pausing to let the words flow over your soul. Have no doubt that God will hold you and that Jesus will share his prayer and peace with you.

Homily 2

Basic to Christianity is the belief that Jesus is the human revelation of God, and that what Jesus revealed in his actions and in his words is that God is love, which is to say that God is pouring out his Spirit over the whole of the created universe to enable every creature to fulfil its God-given potential. The Beloved Disciple expresses this by placing on Jesus’ lips the words” ‘I have come that you may live and live to the full’ (John 10:10).

The word ‘vocation’ picks this up. Every person is unique. Every person has his or her unique way of loving. God is calling each one to resist pressures whether from within or without that hinder us from finding the path that will lead to loving everyone and everything ‘with all our heart, mind, soul and strength’(Mark 12:30).

Essential to this discovery and this journey is that we be free, and, as the Beloved Disciple also says: ‘If the Son sets you free you will be free indeed’ (John 8:36). No one has ever become a saint by conforming out of fear. Paul knew this and wrote passionately about it in what may be his earliest letter, written to the young Christian communities in Galatia. He spoke of those who were ‘spying on the freedom we have in the Messiah, Jesus, so that they might enslave us’(Galatians 2:4). He went on to say: ‘For freedom the Messiah has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery’(Galatians 5:1). He was referring to the pressure being brought upon them in God’s name by followers of Jesus who saw conformity, not freedom, as the way to find security (salvation).

When we reflect on the wonderful truth that God is love and that we are made in God’s image, the importance of our learning to love becomes obvious. God does not control. God loves. And God’s grace is always there, inspiring us to dare the journey of love. To speak of ‘vocation’ is to speak of the call to find and follow the path where each of us can discover the best way to give ourselves to others in love.

There is a lot we have to let go if we are to undertake this journey: we have to let go whatever is inhibiting love, however precious it may be.

It is obvious that most people find themselves through a partnership, significantly the partnership of a committed love. There are people all around us whose lives together witness to this truth.

However, since the beginning of Christianity there have been those who have experienced a call to love in the way Jesus loved, even to his choice ‘for the sake of the kingdom’(Matthew 19:12) to live without a sexual life companion. Paul is an early example (1Cor 9:5). He even wished that

'all were as I myself am', but he recognized, of course, that 'each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind'(1Cor 7:7). He could see that there is no freedom in living a 'single' life, if it means that we fail to mature, that we fail to learn love, that we fail to 'live and live to the full'. Down through the centuries, and today, we see examples of people who have matured into great lovers, through their commitment to Christ and to the Christian community and its mission as 'single'.

No way of loving is better in itself than any other way. Each of us is called (inspired, graced) to find the best way we can grow and mature so as to offer our unique way of loving, so that we can all say, with Saint Paul: 'I live no longer I; it is the Messiah who lives in me. The life I live now is the life of sharing in the faith of the Son of God, who is loving me and giving himself for me'(Galatians 2:20).

There are numerous stories of vocation in the Hebrew Scriptures: one thinks of Abraham (Genesis 12:1), Gideon (Judges 6:14), Samuel (1Samuel 3:4ff), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8). There are always two features. The first is that the call comes from God. The second is that the one called is listening. Nowhere is this more beautifully expressed than by Luke in the call of Jesus' mother, Mary (Luke 1:26-38). The initiative comes from God who asks her to open herself to his love. Her response: 'Let it be done to me according to your word'.

Happiness lies in daring the journey of love that God invites us on. Whatever the path we take, may we be able to say with Jesus: 'The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him'(John 8:29).