

Homily: 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

You may well know the story of King Canute, who sat on the seashore and commanded the tide to turn back so that his feet wouldn't get wet. It didn't, of course – but that was precisely the point Canute wanted to make. He wasn't God; he didn't have power over nature. As a human being, even as a king, his authority was limited. So we don't have to think too hard to see what the Gospel is teaching us today, when Jesus calms the wind and the violent waves. The Apostles ask: "Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey Him." There can only be one answer: He is God.

This passage is one of my favourites in the Gospel, I suppose because it's comforting to know that, when life gets stormy, we can turn to Jesus and He has authority even over the fiercest threats and most difficult problems we face. It invites us to entrust all our cares to Him. But it's also a significant passage for another reason: this is the only story in the Gospel which explicitly tells us that Jesus was asleep. And this detail is worthy of some reflection.

We might first of all ask ourselves: how can Jesus sleep in a storm? It seems like this is the first miracle He works – sleeping through a violent tempest! But, as the Apostles flounder and cry out in fear, the Lord is completely serene. The disciples think He can sleep because He doesn't care, but the truth is different: Jesus does care very much, but He can sleep because He has perfect trust in His heavenly Father. St Mark tells us that the Lord's head rested on a cushion: maybe this makeshift pillow symbolises God the Father. Here Jesus rests His head, utterly content because He is held secure in the Father's love.

This incident points us to another event, late on in the Gospel, involving sleep: the Garden of Gethsemane. The two scenes are almost a reversal of one another. In the boat, the Apostles, in great distress and fear, afraid for their lives, wake Jesus and say to Him, "Do you not care? We are going down." But in the garden it is Jesus who experiences this same horror. He wakes Peter, James and John from their sleep and asks, "How is it that you are sleeping?" He has taken their place; He has taken their fear upon Himself. Now they can rest serenely, because He is taking their sins, their sufferings, even their death upon Himself.

St Bede links the wood of the boat to the cross of Jesus. Mark tells us that they "took Jesus" in the boat, just as later, He will be taken and led to Calvary. When Jesus died on the cross, He was again asleep, but this time, the sleep of death. Then, disciples were scattered in dismay and anguish, fearing for their lives, just as they had in the boat. When He rose from the dead, He asked them: "Why do you doubt? Why do you have such little faith?" The risen Lord greeted them with the words, "Peace be with you". And when the storm is calmed, it is like the resurrection: the Lord wakes from sleep, He asks the disciples: "Why are you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?" They are filled with awe, just as they will be when they see the risen Lord. And peace descends upon the wind and the waves, as though He says even to them, "Peace be with you".

I often think it's significant that Jesus leads them into this situation. He is the One who suggests crossing the lake, so – with full knowledge of what will happen – He brings them into the storm. He does so to teach them to trust Him, to have faith, even in the face of the greatest trials. Whatever we face, even death, is nothing to Jesus: He has conquered all. Today's Gospel begins with these words: "With the coming of evening, Jesus said to His disciples, 'Let us cross over to the other side.'" These words can bring consolation in the face of death. When the evening of our life comes, Jesus will say to us: let us cross over – together – to the other side. For us, it seems like a fearful journey, but Jesus, serene and all-powerful – will be with us, leading us, when the time comes for us to make that voyage.

There's one more lesson to draw from Jesus, asleep in the boat. St Augustine reminds us that sometimes we allow Jesus to sleep in us. We let our awareness of Him doze off; we forget to be conscious of His presence within us. And then life gets to us. He writes: "When you are insulted, that is the wind. When you are angry, that is the waves. So when the winds blow and the waves surge, your heart is in jeopardy, your heart is tossed to and fro. On being insulted, you long to retaliate. But revenge wreaks another kind of misfortune: shipwreck. Why? Because Christ is asleep in you. What do I mean? I mean you have forgotten Christ. Rouse Him, then; remember Christ, let Christ awake within you, give heed to Him" (*Sermon* 63.1-3). If we ever feel tossed about by the waves of life; if we ever find a storm raging in our hearts, let's not complain that Christ is asleep. Let's awaken Him in our hearts, let's recall His presence. Let's rest on Him, allowing Him to be our cushion in the boat, so that we may find contentment and peace. Even the winds and the sea obey Him. We can trust Him with anything!

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