

What do we seek when we read or listen to the gospels? I think that for many, the answer is, quite simply, that we seek to know Jesus better. Thus, through each passage, we strive to understand what it teaches us about him – about his humanity, about his divinity. And that is a very good approach. But this Sunday’s gospel – particularly when considered in a wider context – suggests a different angle or avenue of approach: namely, we can reflect upon how Jesus, in each scene, in each passage, strives to shape the hearts of his disciples to face the trials and tribulations that must come.

I mentioned a broader context. Indeed, this stormy night at sea is not the first the disciples have in the Gospel of Matthew. If we back up a few chapters, to where Christ healed the centurion’s servant and then also Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, it tells us that after the healings he got into a boat with his disciples. “And behold,” it says, “there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he” – the Lord – “was asleep”.¹ We know the story well; we know how they awoke him in a panic. He “rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm”.

Well, recall that at the beginning of today’s passage, it said that the Lord “made” the disciples get into the boat, while he departed. Perhaps he had to make them precisely because they remembered their prior experience of a nighttime storm at sea, and wished him come with them to rebuke the tempest again. If only they had been able to leave earlier, when they wanted to – but he delayed them by feeding the five thousand. And now, he was not going with them as they set sail. Yes, even before the storm arose, they were already afraid. And they would have to endure the storm for the whole night.

They must have been utter emotional wrecks as they endured it all through the fourth watch of the night – that is, almost until daybreak. They had been with Jesus the entire preceding day, already experiencing a wide range of emotions as they learned of the death of John the Baptist and then saw Jesus feed such a large crowd. And now they were awake all night, fighting the waves, wondering if their end was near. We get a sense of how on edge they were by their fright over seeing Christ come to them on the water. They should have recognized him, but they were out of their minds by that point.

The disciples had to learn through these two sea trials that whether Christ was in the boat or out, he was always capable of saving them. Recall the important teaching from Saint Paul, about how “nothing can separate us from the love of Christ” – not “powers, nor height, nor depth”.² Think of how Saint Peter, for example, would later be thrown in prison: by then he would have known that no chains, no lock and key, could keep Christ from coming to him. The experience of these and other trials fortified all the disciples to take up their crosses and follow after the Master – and follow they did.

At this or that time in our own lives, we, too, have no doubt felt like the ship was going down – that no one was guiding the rudder; we may indeed have thought that it was not that the Lord was with us, but sleeping – but rather, that he was not even in the boat! As Paul and Barnabas preached in the Acts of the Apostles, “We must undergo many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God”.³ See how Christ shapes us, also, through our present trials, to have what it

¹ See Matthew 8:23-27.

² See Romans 8:35-39.

³ See Acts 14:22.

takes to enter his Kingdom. This, I would submit, is one way we may read not only the gospel but also our present situation.

And as Elijah learned in the first reading, God reveals himself not in tempests and torments, but in the stillness and silence – in the calm after the storm. We know not whether we are in the fourth watch of the night yet or still at some earlier stage, but it is certain that he will come and show himself to us – that he will save those who persevere. We do not have to wait for his external revelation, however, for at each Holy Mass, even amidst our tribulations, he comes to us in the Holy Eucharist, albeit in a veiled and quiet way. He says to us, also, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid”.