

# 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year

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“Do not be afraid!” These words occur some 360 times across the pages of the Bible. There are times when all of us become discouraged or fearful – and perhaps with good reason given the circumstances. In our first reading, Elijah has just defeated 450 prophets of Baal at a spectacular confrontation on Mount Carmel. Now flees for his life from the murderous rage of Queen Jezebel. He goes to Mount Horeb, where he hopes to encounter God in an awesome display of power just as Moses had. As on Mount Sinai there is a display of God’s power—wind, earthquake, fire—but “the LORD was not in” any of these. God’s presence is manifest in the “tiny whispering sound.”

People often discover God in nature: the grandeur of mountain scenery, the vastness of the oceans, or perhaps the delicacy of a rose. The popular hymn ‘O Lord my God’ captures this vision of the power of God but in a reflective mood. The disciples discover it in a much more direct way. They are tossed about by the storm in a small boat – and to make matters worse Jesus is not with them. We have our own storms and troubles in life – sometimes in a dramatic way, other times a more long term sense of depression or helplessness. The hymn by Cardinal Newman reflects both of these. It was written in a boat off the coast of Italy during a storm and at a time of emotional turbulence in his personal life and faith.

“Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,  
lead thou me on;  
the night is dark, and I am far from home;  
lead thou me on.  
Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see  
the distant scene; one step enough for me.”

When Jesus comes across the water to the disciples, he says, “Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid”. Courage is the virtue by which we face up to our fears and through God’s grace overcome them. The salvation of the world depends not on us but on God. We have our part to play but we do not overcome our discouragement or fears by our inner strength but by acknowledging our weakness and putting our hand into the hand of God. He comes to calm the waves and hold us up when we reach out to him as Peter did on the Sea of Galilee. He waits for us to reach out to him in a moment of silent prayer in the midst of our tumult as he did for Elijah on Mount Horeb. For a Christian courage is not so much a matter of personality as an expression of faith. God is with us no matter how far away he may seem.

Today’s Gospel is not simply a demonstration of Our Lord’s divine power, but of his loving mercy and desire to save us. Jesus responds to Peter’s uncertainty by inviting him to step out in faith, and come to him across the water. Even Peter’s faith falters as he feels the strength of the wind but Our Lord reaches out to hold him up. When he gets into the boat, the winds fall, and the disciples respond, “Truly, you are the Son of God.” So too for us, it is often only when the crisis has passed that we can see how the Lord accompanied us.