

**Nineteenth
Sunday
in Ordinary
Time**

Year A



FIRST READING
1 Kings 19:9, 11–13

PSALM
Psalm 85:9–14

SECOND READING
Romans 9:1–5

GOSPEL
Matthew 14:22–33

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PRAYER

Psalm 85:9–14

Let me hear
what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who
turn to him in their hearts.
Surely his salvation is at hand
for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
Steadfast love and faithfulness
will meet;
righteousness and peace
will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up
from the ground,
and righteousness
will look down from the sky.
The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

**READING
THE WORD**

First Reading
1 Kings 19:9, 11–13

At that place Elijah he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “What are you

doing here, Elijah? Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Second Reading
Romans 8:28–30

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Gospel
Matthew 14:22–33

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said,

“Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

HEARING THE WORD

“Fragility”

In the liturgy of this Sunday we encounter three important biblical figures in moments of great fragility and vulnerability, which could potentially prevent them from caring out their respective missions. First, we meet the prophet Elijah who demonstrated that the God of Israel is the one true God by bringing down fire on the prophets of a false god, Baal, worshipped by King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. In retaliation, Jezebel decided to kill Elijah. The prophet fled all the way to Mount Sinai (called “Horeb” in 1 Kings). There, in the state of discouragement and confusion he made a bitter complaint to God expressing his discouragement and resignation: “I am full of jealous zeal for Yahweh Sabaoth, because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, have torn down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I am the only one left, and now they want

to kill me” (1 Kgs 19:10). In response, God came to speak with Elijah, but did so in a very particular manner. False gods, which the majority of the non-Israelites worshipped at the time, were believed to be powerful beings who manifested themselves through such natural phenomena as thunderbolts, whirlwind, fire or rock-shattering earthquakes. Yet God’s voice came to the prophet as a soft whisper from the midst of a gentle breeze. In this story, we see a tremendous contrast between the violent and overwhelming powers of nature and the murmuring, gentle sound of a morning breeze.

This story teaches two important lessons. First, the God of Israel is different from the false gods of nature. The true God does not need overwhelming displays of power to carry out his purposes. A gentle whisper of a true God is infinitely more effective than the roaring thunder of an idol. Second, Elijah, when receiving this revelation was in a very fragile condition. He was threatened and he doubted himself and his mission. In such circumstances God met him with sensitivity and gentleness. This gentleness had nothing to do with powerlessness and inaction. On the contrary, Elijah, in the subsequent verses, would be given very specific instructions on how to fight his enemies (1Kgs 19:15-18). Yet, God met the prophet with gentleness appropriate to his condition, which emphasises that human weakness is not an obsta-

cle for God to carry out his purposes, even through fragile creatures.

Chapter 9 of Paul’s letter to the Romans begins the section of this complex work where the apostle deals with the troubling issue of rejection of Jesus by the vast majority of his fellow people, the Israelites. This rejection was particularly painful for Paul because, even though he believed in Jesus and became Christian, he still strongly felt a part of the Israelite family and was firmly rooted in his ancestral traditions, be it modified by his faith in Christ. In one of his most emotional statements the apostle writes of his “great sorrow and unremitting agony” caused by the rejection of Jesus by his own people. He was a man internally torn by divided loyalties – his utter commitment to Christ and the Gospel on the one hand, and loyalty to his people on the other. Here we see a man in the state of inner conflict, a fragile human being so desperate as to even speak of his willingness to be cursed and condemned if that could only benefit his own people in some way. Mournfully Paul recalled all the privileges that the Israelites had received from God, starting with adoption by God as his children. He also recognised that Christ came from these very people who, in the end, disowned him. This state of mind and heart was not just a momentary and passing feeling. The apostle carried this pain and sadness within himself every day of his

life and ministry. Still, he was able to carry out his mission because of Jesus' sustaining presence. He referred to this in another letter quoting the reassuring words of Jesus he had heard: "My grace is enough for you: for power is at full stretch in weakness." It is, then, about my weaknesses that I am happiest of all to boast, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor 12:9). Paul accepted his own weakness and fragility, and even rejoiced in them, knowing that they can be overcome with Jesus' grace and help. This enabled him to go on with the ministry.

Peter is the hero in the Gospel of Matthew. Among several passages unique to this Gospel and focused on Peter, today's story is the only one which shows Peter's fragility and "little faith". It is also only in Matthew's Gospel where we see him attempting to walk on the water. Initially successful in taking some courageous steps on the waves, Peter showed his fragility and vulnerability when, faced with the overwhelming wind, he lost confidence and began to sink. Then, in a truly moving gesture Jesus stretched out his hand towards the drowning disciple and brought him safely to the boat. The other disciples' response was equally moving; they prostrated themselves before Jesus in a gesture of worship. Having witnessed Jesus' saving act in response to Peter's weakness and vulnerability, they recognised him as the divine Son of God. In this, uniquely Matthean story, we see Jesus stretching out his

hand towards the disciple whose little faith was undermined by doubt and fear. Peter would fail again, most notably in Gethsemane; yet neither this nor any subsequent failure prevented Jesus from entrusting him with leadership of the young Christian community. Again, we learn that "little faith", doubt, and fears do not prevent God from carrying out his purposes through a fragile human being.

Biblical heroes were neither faultless nor invulnerable. Virtually all those through whom God acted and who carried out God's works in history were, in some ways, flawed and fragile. In today's liturgy we see three of the Bible's most important individuals: Elijah, Peter and Paul in situations of distress and vulnerability. Elijah was discouraged and lost. Paul found himself deeply torn between commitment to Christ and loyalty to his people. Peter, eager to be like his master, could not sustain his resolve when faced with the threatening environment. He was made painfully aware about being a man of "little faith". In the case of Elijah and Peter we saw how God and Jesus reached to the prophet and the apostle respectively with sustaining gentleness. Paul, in his long argument in Rom chs 9 - 11 eventually arrived at the conviction that God will never disown the Israelites, and that eventually they will come to see and embrace the light of the Gospel (cf. Rom 11:1-26). In all three readings we are made aware that human fragility is well-known to God, but this does not deter God

from entrusting his mission to flawed people. God is active in and through a person's fragility and shortcomings and enables him or her to carry out his saving purposes in the world. Knowing this, we can be confident in God's sustaining and guiding presence in the midst of human weakness as the psalmist was when saying: "Yahweh will himself give prosperity, and our soil will yield its harvest."

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

A hardworking German catholic missionary in the southern part of Ghana never ceases to amaze many people on account of his fearlessness and sense of commitment to duty. He is so bold and adventurous that he is able to start almost any project and bring it to completion. However, in spite of his courageous character, he has a morbid fear for one thing, namely, a syringe. Anytime he sets his eyes on a syringe at any health facility, he passes out and goes unconscious. Yes, a small needle is enough to remind him of his fragility and vulnerability in spite of his apparent boldness.

The courageous Elijah whose prayer brought life to the dead son of the widow of Zarephath and who overcame the four hundred Baal prophets on mount Carmel is pictured hiding in a cave, after fleeing from Jezebel who had threatened his life. In spite of all his exploits, Elijah, like any other human being, was a

fragile man. He was, however, not bereft of God's presence and care even in the cave. In fact, he remained under the radar of God who revealed himself to him in a light murmuring sound.

Peter too stands out as an outspoken person in the community of apostles. He showed his fearlessness in the Gospel text when he said, "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you across the water." However, his fragility became evident when the wind deflated his faith in his attempt to walk on water and he started sinking. It took the intervention of the Lord to save him from drowning.

Paul brought many gentiles to the faith but found himself powerless in bringing his own Jewish brothers and sisters to faith in Christ. He expressed his fragility in the words, '...there is great sorrow and unremitting agony in my heart: I could pray that I myself might be accursed and cut off from Christ, if this could benefit the brothers who are my own flesh and blood.'

From the above, we can deduce that Elijah, Peter and Paul, at some point in time on their journey of faith, came face to face with the reality of human vulnerability - a susceptibility that made them rely on God and not on themselves.

There is a soft spot in every one of us - something about each one of us that reminds us of our powerlessness and our need for a power greater than our-

selves. We often look out for caves to hide in when pressure mounts and strong winds threaten to snuff out the life in us. We cry out in fear when it becomes evident that we are sinking in a quagmire of problems. However, the Lord who was present in the cave with Elijah and rescued Peter from sinking is always near to raise us up when we are down.

There is an African proverb which says, "a baby at the back of its mother can afford to sleep even in a jungle". Although there are many things that can frighten a baby, the presence of the mother is enough assurance to keep him/her in peace. In the same way, a deepened consciousness of the presence of God in our lives is the antidote to the fear that wages war with our hearts.

God does not call perfect human beings; he calls frail men and women and perfects them. He empowers fragile men and women to accomplish great things. Like an egg, there is always the danger of falling and breaking but when we are in the hands of God, we are safe. The message of Jesus to the frightened disciples on the lake is apt for each one of us, "Courage! It's me! Don't be afraid."

PROVERB

"A baby at the back of its mother can afford to sleep even in a jungle."

ACTION

Self-examination:

Have my human weaknesses deflated my confidence in the Lord? Am I 'sinking' on account of fear? Is there something that is troubling my mind?

Response to God:

Within the context of prayer, I sit quietly in the presence of God and hand over to him every weakness in me.

Response to your World:

There are many people who live in fear on account of the challenges they have to contend with daily. Like a light murmuring sound, our mere presence in their lives can bring them hope. As a group or as an individual, we examine our environment and identify a person or a situation to whom we can bring the light of hope and reassurance.

PRAYER

*Lord God,
you have proven
to be a faithful companion on
the journey of life.
In you, I place my trust
and I shall not be disappointed,
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*