

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

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

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?”

Romans 9:1–5

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.

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

*Scripture quotations from
New Revised Standard Version Bible:
Catholic Edition, © 1989, 1993.
Used with permission.*

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"

The reading of this Sunday present three important biblical figures in moments of great fragility and vulnerability, which could potentially prevent them from carrying out their respective missions.

The first reading presents 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 to far-away Mount Sinai, called "Horeb" in 1 Kings. There, in a 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 softly murmuring, gentle sound of a morning breeze.

This story teaches two important lessons. First, the God of Israel is different from the false gods associated with the violent side of nature. The true God does not need overwhelming displays of power to carry out his purposes. A gentle whisper of the 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 confront his enemies (1 Kgs 19:15-18). Yet, God met the prophet with gentleness appropriate to his condition, which emphasises that human weakness is not an obstacle 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 devoted to 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 tradition. In one of his most emotional statements in this letter, the apostle writes of his "great sorrow and unremitting agony" caused by the rejection of Jesus by his own people. Here, Paul shows himself as 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. He must have felt a painful inner conflict that drove him to speak of his willingness to be cursed and condemned, if that would 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 affirmed that Christ came from among the 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" (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. Relying on Jesus, he was able to go on with the ministry in spite of the painful struggle he carried within himself.

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". The episode of him attempting to walk on water is reported by Matthew alone.

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 to the safety of the boat.

The other disciples' response to what they witnessed 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.

This again shows 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. Today's liturgy shows three of the Bible's most important individuals: Elijah, Paul and Peter in distress. 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". Yet God did not leave his servants alone. Elijah and Peter were strengthened by the divine, sustaining gentle presence. Paul, eventually understood 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). All three readings clearly show that human fragility is well-known to God, but this does not deter God from entrusting his work to flawed people. God is active in and through a person's fragility and shortcomings. Knowing this, his servants can be as confident in God's sustaining and guiding presence, and rejoice with the Psalmist who affirms that God "will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts".

Listening to the Word of God

A hardworking German missionary in the southern part of Ghana never ceases to amaze many people on account of his fearlessness and a 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 this strong man of his fragility and vulnerability in spite of his unwavering 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 had God's attention and God 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 examples, 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 ourselves. 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 conscious-

ness 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 and my ability to serve him meaningfully?

What are my fears and weaknesses that make me "sink". How can I overcome them and start walking again?

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

I resolve and act to be light murmuring sound and a reassuring presence to someone who needs sustaining and renewal.

There are many people who live in fear on account of the challenges they have to contend with daily. As a group, 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