

## Sermon by Fr. Fromageot on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Ref. Epistle: Rom. 13, 8-10; Gospel, Matt. 8, 23-27

### And Jesus Was Asleep

Today's gospel gives us a great opportunity not only for meditation in general but also gives us a chance to think about the dynamics onboard a boat or ship. The most striking part of today's gospel is perhaps what our Lord does at the very end, when He commands the waves of the sea to be still and, lo and behold, the storm subsides. It should be noted that on a lake the size of Lake Galilee — it is a rather small lake — you would think that any kind of storm on that lake would be a fairly minor event. But the fact is that even today on Lake Galilee, when a storm breaks out on that lake, though I wouldn't call it a hurricane, it would still be quite dangerous, especially in Our Lord's time when boats could be broken apart fairly easily in comparison to today's boats. And so, our Lord's calming of the storm is certainly a miraculous manifesting of His divinity, a manifestation that was sure to dazzle even the most skeptical among those who witnessed it. But if we reflect on, as I said, the dynamics of being aboard a boat, especially during a storm, you see another way in which our Lord manifests His divinity. Many of the disciples were experienced fishermen, St Peter for example. And there were some, I am sure, who were not experienced, probably did not like being in a boat at all, St. Matthew the tax collector for example.

During that storm, I am sure, the experienced disciples were doing all they could to keep that boat seaworthy, to keep it afloat. They were probably barking orders here and there, trying to pull in the rigging, whatever it took to be sure they did not sink. And I am sure the more inexperienced of the disciples were doing whatever it was that, say St. Peter, was instructing them to do. Chances are, they were trying to stay out of the way of St. Peter and the other seasoned fishermen.

And you can imagine what they would be like. They would be hanging on for dear life, their white knuckles grasping the gunwales, their hearts in their throats. And they would probably be praying that everything was going to work out.

Our Lord, however, was not trying to stay out of the way. He was not hanging on for dear life. He was asleep. Imagine that! Sleeping during a terrific storm! Now, I'm sure the disciples were not catching onto this at the time, because they were worried about more pressing matters — how to keep the boat afloat — instead of marveling at the calmness of our Lord Himself. Likewise, when we hear this story, Our Lord's sleeping doesn't attract our attention, at least not immediately. But when we read that gospel, and reflect on this incident, as I am sure the disciples must have after they were safely ashore, we can marvel at this seemingly insignificant detail that St. Matthew troubles himself to record: Our Lord was asleep in the boat.

The Church fathers often regard any boat in the scriptures as a symbol of the Church. And this patristic understanding is certainly applicable to the boat in today's gospel. The fathers would look at that boat as the Church making her way through the world, being tossed about by various evils, either within or without. But because the Church is also like a house built on a rock; because she enjoys the divine protection, she will always ride the waves to safety, however dire the situation in which she finds herself. When we experience these situations, when it seems as though the Church is about to break up and founder, it is our faith in that divine protection, our faith in Our Lord's promise to St. Peter that the gates of hell would not prevail against His Church, that keeps us from falling into despair and abandoning the Barque of Peter.

On the literal level, the disciples *were* weak in faith, as Our Lord tells them. They awakened Him up because they were afraid they would sink. They had come to the realization that their own efforts were insufficient to keep the boat afloat. Now, when all seemed hopeless, they were ready to seek the help of the Master. They didn't say to themselves, "Look, we have the Lord with us. Nothing can happen to us as long as He is with us. Let Him sleep. We'll make it." On the contrary, they thought they had been in charge, that their efforts were all that was necessary to keep the boat afloat. But now they had definitely lost control, or at least the sense of being in control; their efforts to save the boat were clearly insufficient. And so, in desperation, they called upon the Lord.

On the spiritual level, however, the disciples teach us a valuable lesson. When we feel the tossing and turning of the Church, when we see the waves towering above her and threatening to founder her, we *should* go to the Lord, acknowledging his sovereignty over our lives and over His Church. When we find ourselves beset by some evil, we should go to the Lord. In a way He is sleeping, since we don't perceive Him with our senses. And yet, He is present and very much in control, just as He was present in the boat and in control. He was asleep to show that His being in control of events does not depend on His being awake, or His being physically present in our midst as He was 2000 years ago. Now it takes faith on our part, as well as humility, to recognize and acknowledge that the Captain of the ship, Christ Himself, is in charge, even though we do not see Him.

Every time we walk into a Catholic church, we enter a physical symbol of the Church. (Is it any wonder that the part of the church where you are seated is called the nave, a word that comes from the Latin *navis*, which means ship or boat?) When we come into a Catholic Church, we, too, can approach the Lord, present in the Blessed Sacrament. We can pour out our troubles to Him, uniting them to His own sufferings that He endured for us on the cross. When we pay Our Lord a visit and, as it were, awaken Him, we do so not because we lack faith, but because we have faith.

Now, the Church is aptly described as a boat for other reasons besides the trials and tribulations that she must undergo in every age. First of all, the boat has a crew. Everyone has a job to do. Everyone has a role, a place. This crew is characterized by hierarchy, order, and discipline. This sort of crew is not an option, for life at sea, while it may seem very romantic and very pleasant, is in fact very difficult and very demanding. Likewise, apart from a visible hierarchy, as well as a certain amount of order and discipline, the Church could not perform her mission well.

The Church is also likened to a ship inasmuch as a ship in the middle of a lake provides a great deal of comfort and safety. In the topsy turvy world, the sacraments and holy doctrines of the Church, together with her vision or understanding of life, provide her members with the necessary means to reach the harbor of eternal life.

Our salvation cannot occur apart from the Church. We can't go off into the mountains and hug a tree, or do what ever we think will draw us closer to God on our own terms. No, God wants to save us according to our nature, and our nature is that we are social. We belong in society. We are not apolitical, as people like John Locke and those minds of the Enlightenment would have us believe. Because we could not survive apart from society, and because grace builds on nature, it follows that we could not "survive" on our own, independent of the sacraments and doctrines that Christ entrusted to His Church.

Since the Church is necessary for our salvation, we shall certainly perish if we reject what she teaches, or if we refuse to love one another as Christ first loved us. And so it is fitting that the Church has juxtaposed this gospel, which deals with the corporate dimension of salvation, with the excerpt from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, which deals with the conduct of the individual members of the Church. He speaks about loving one's neighbor, and he gives a list that enumerates some of the commandments that are really at the heart of what it means to love one's neighbor. He specifies what it means to love, for if we try to love on our own terms and not the way Christ loved us, we cannot say that we are faithful followers, faithful disciples of Christ. And if we need to be reminded of what it means to love as Christ loved us, all we have to do is look upon Christ crucified.

On this day, when we ponder our Lord manifest in His divinity in this wonderful way, by changing the weather on Lake Galilee, let us not forget that He also manifests His divinity by sleeping in the boat: seemingly oblivious to the waves, yet fully present and in command. May we never doubt His presence in the Church, nor His sovereignty over the whole world. Likewise, though we do not see Him, may we ever strive to make room for Christ in our hearts; may we ever strive to make Him Captain of our lives.