

Sermon for Proper 14A

The Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Has someone ever offered you a helping hand when you needed it most? The writer of this sermon relates this story: I was mountain-climbing with a couple of friends when I developed a cramp. We were near the top of the mountain, and my friends said it would be easier to help me to the summit, rather than go down the way we came. Why? Because they knew that the slope on the other side of the mountain was very gentle and gradual. I have experienced our Lord's protecting hand on many occasions. On our farm, it was a miracle I escaped being savaged by our bull. In Melbourne, I was involved in a car accident in which I felt our Saviour's protecting hand guarding me from serious injury.

Don't we sometimes go on our way, confident that we can meet any kind of danger? What really throw us are the unexpected dangers that we never anticipated. There are people who, when they fear for their life, cry out to God for help. God, for them, is like a fire extinguisher: "FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY". Our Lord wants to be our first resource in any and every difficult situation in daily life, rather than our last resort when all else fails. Jesus isn't simply an optional extra for those with time on their hands. The busier we are, the more we need to seek His blessing on what we do well, as well as seeking His help when things go wrong. When dangers loom, we sometimes feel we're left to our own devices. We can be too overwhelmed by fear to even remember to pray. A good prayer to pray each day is, "Lord, if I should forget you today, remember me."

In last week's Gospel, our Lord had shown immense concern and care for 5,000 hungry people by feeding them. After this extraordinary act of kindness, witnessed by His disciples, Jesus sends the twelve on a boat trip across the lake while He goes elsewhere to pray. When a storm threatens the twelve apostles' lives, they panic, thinking that Jesus has abandoned them. Overwhelmed by fear, they fail to realise that Jesus was near. In fact, while they were battling the wind and the waves, Jesus had been praying for them.

Just when we think we're all alone, our Saviour's prayers for us may be surrounding us with His guiding hand, though we may not be able to see it at the time. For us Christians, things are never quite what they seem.

The main concern for many of us is not to be able to “walk on water”, but simply to keep our head above water. “

We don't always recognize Jesus when He comes to our aid. The twelve apostles, too, imagined Jesus as an apparition that would only make their perilous situation worse, rather than shouting for joy at the sight of Him actually walking on the water to come to their aid. Haven't we sometimes felt the same? When Jesus approaches us with His help through an illness, setback or greater responsibility, we fail to recognise Him, and instead of being certain that He hears our prayers, we panic.

Only Christ's word of comfort can give us assurance of His presence and silence our fears. “Be of good cheer, have no fear, it is I”, Jesus says. Jesus' disciples needed nothing more than our Lord's reassuring voice. Full of joy, Peter now acts on impulse, as he so often does, and asks if he too can walk on water. And all goes well at first, while Peter stays focussed on Jesus. It is remarkable, isn't it, what we can do when we forget our problems and dangers, and place our whole trust in Christ alone. Peter had faith strong enough to get him out of the boat, but not strong enough to cope with the storm. Peter's faith bounces back when he realises he cannot manage on his own, but that everything now depends on Jesus. “Lord, save me”, Peter cries out. Jesus let this happen so that Peter could experience our Saviour's protecting hand.

As we go about our daily duties, we sometimes see examples of our Saviour's protecting hand, sparing His people from what could have been very dangerous car accidents. In heaven, we'll all learn how often Jesus protected us from harm and danger from day to day, when we were least aware of it.

A man involved in a terrible train accident told a friend how he thanked God that he emerged unscathed.

His friend asked: “How often have you travelled safely along that train line?”

“At least 50 times” was the reply.

“Have you thought of thanking God for all those times you travelled safely?”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer found that God gives us the help we need when He sees it is best, and not before. Bonhoeffer writes: “I believe that God will give us the staying power we need in each situation, not before, in order

that we rely not on ourselves, but Him. With such faith must we overcome all fear of the future.” We may not know what the future will bring, but we do know Him who holds the future in His hands, and we can trust Him to care for us.

Our Saviour sometimes seems to abandon us. He does this so that we cling all the more firmly to Him. Jesus can use our fears and anxieties to draw us closer to Him. Nothing can separate us from His almighty love. Faith means realising that our Saviour’s protecting hand hangs onto us when we can no longer hang onto Him. Divine grace is more like a mother cat grabbing its kitten by the scruff of its neck, rather than like a baby monkey which clings to its mother. We stake our lives on the Lord’s promise: “I will never leave you or forsake you ... underneath are the everlasting arms.” Some 366 times, God says to us in the Bible: “Fear not.” That’s enough times for every day of the year, including leap year. We haven’t been promised a life of ease and comfort, or a trouble free existence. Maturity in faith and love develops as we face life’s discomforts and troubles with God, who has promised to be “a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1).”

Troubles are the tools God uses to shape us for better things.

We’re safer in a storm with Christ, than anywhere else without Him. The boat in our Gospel reading represents Christ’s Church. I would rather face life’s challenges with Christ and fellow Christians, than to be on the outside trying to cope with the storms and stresses of daily living on my own. When the pressures of daily life get too much for us to cope with on our own, Jesus gives us fellow Church members to lean on, to uphold us, and to pray for us. Our Saviour extends His protective hand to us through His Church. His Church is His protecting and sheltering hand over our faith, guarding it from doubt and despair. Through His Word and sacraments, Jesus continues to strengthen our faith from all the attacks it faces week by week.

God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea / And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; / The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break / In blessing on your head.

Hymn 414, v.1 and 3

Amen.