

NO REST FOR THE WEARY

By Father Warren Rouse

At one time or another, most of us have said, “I just want to get away from it all.” Jesus is no exception. Matthew (c.14) tells us that, following the multiplication of loaves, Jesus “immediately made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.” No excuses for the disciples to linger about!

Jesus has his own customary agenda: “He went up to the mountain by himself to pray.” St. John Chrysostom reflects that “this teaches us earnestly to seek such quietness in our prayer as the time and place may afford. For the wilderness is the mother of silence; it is a calm and a harbor, delivering us from all turmoils.” Blasé Pascal (*Pensees*) puts it tersely: “All the troubles of life come upon us because we refuse to sit quietly for a while each day in our rooms.”

In recent years, the expression, “desert experience,” has come into vogue. It recognizes that most of us cannot physically go out into a desert, so we are encouraged to have a quiet time and a quiet place—perhaps in our home, maybe just a room in our home or apartment—where we can set aside our cares and our memorized prayers and just...be. Be with the Lord: “When evening came, he was there alone.” Is there an invitation here for us?

Try as we may, however, there are the odd interruptions and distractions now and then. So it is with Jesus during “the fourth watch” (between 3:00 and 6:00 am): he notices a change in the weather and becomes concerned about his chosen ones out on the lake. And with good reason: “By this time the boat, battered by the

waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.”

It is clear that the disciples, skilled as they are, have been fighting the storm without success. Psalm 107 could accurately describe their situation: “They reeled and staggered like drunken men, and were at their wits’ end.”

Jesus just doesn’t stay put, “saying his prayers,” as we sometimes do as a substitute for prayer-in-action. “He came walking toward them on the sea.” One can understand the consternation of the floundering men: “When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear.”



Jesus is quite familiar with the emotion of fear—he has experienced it and will do so in the greatest possible measure later on. “But immediately Jesus spoke to them and

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This sounds like a straightforward command, but what is significant is: “It is

I.” In several places in the Old Testament that is a substitute for the divine name. In Isaiah (c. 43) it appears alongside “fear not.” Daniel Harrington (*The Gospel of Matthew*) notes that “the use of such language identifies Jesus as the one who reveals the God of Israel and is uniquely related to that God.”

With centuries of hindsight this is clear to us, but such is not the case with the Twelve who are still learners (and a bit slow, in our sophisticated judgment). Impulsive Peter is a man of action: “Peter

answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’” The “if” says that Peter is not quite sure, but he has enough faith to jump overboard when Jesus simply says: “Come.”

Now here’s an interesting detour, courtesy of St. Augustine, who sees the boat as Church and Peter basically about to abandon ship to save his own skin.

“But when he looked down at the wave churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink.”

In this scenario, Augustine addresses us: “Stay inside the boat and call upon God. When all good advice fails and the rudder is useless...when all human help and strength have been abandoned, the only recourse left for the sailors is to cry out to God. Therefore will he who helps those who are sailing to reach port safely, abandon his Church and prevent it from arriving in peace and tranquility?” Quite a contemporary thought for those who act out their disappointment with the Church today by bailing out!

Back to Peter: he jumps overboard and starts to walk across the waves. “But when he looked down at the wave churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink.” (Peterson translation) He cried, ‘Master, save me!’ Jesus didn’t hesitate. He reached down and grabbed his hand. Then he said, ‘Faint-heart, what got into you?’

Shall we blame Peter for a lack of faith? *The Christian Community Bible* has a telling footnote: “Matthew is not interested in emphasizing Peter’s doubt, but his faith. Peter alone dared to attempt something that seemed to be reserved for Jesus, and after joining his companions again in the boat he was, though soaked, the happiest of them.”

Peter actually is a role-model for our spiritual lives. He is the prototype Christian, if you will, balancing faith and doubt in his life. But faith is stronger and he represents what it asks of us: to believe, against all odds, in the saving power of Jesus. That is the risk.

Many a spiritual writer has highlighted this: there can be no faith

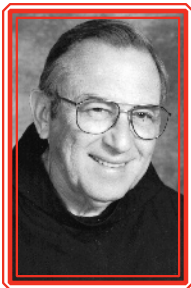
without doubt. Augustine has a remarkable expression: “instructed ignorance.” Acquiring a great deal of theological knowledge is no protection from the fact that all of us walk in a certain amount of darkness (ignorance). Are we willing to take the risk?

There can be no communal commitment without a prior personal commitment.

“The disciples in the boat, having watched the whole thing, worshipped Jesus, saying, ‘This is it! You are God’s Son for sure!’” And yet...where are they—we—when Jesus is sentenced to death?

In the forthcoming, umpteenth revision of the Mass texts, it appears that the beginning of the Creed will reflect the more accurate translation. We’ve been accustomed to, “We believe in one God.” But the Latin is, “Credo in unum Deum”—“I believe in one God.” There can be no communal commitment without a prior personal commitment. Maybe, in that first phrase of the Creed, each of us is actually declaring: “I am taking the risk of believing in God.”

Naturally, our experience painfully demonstrates that we’re not always faithful to our promises. Nor were the apostles. To be sure, they were “insiders,” Jesus’ closest friends. But their personal allegiance demanded that they risk everything for him. Sometimes they failed. And that is why we can resonate with their prayer: “Give us more faith!” (Lk. 17:5).



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