

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – A

[*1 Kings* 19: 9, 11-13; *Psalms* 85; *Romans* 9: 1-5; *Matthew* 14: 22-33]

Like you, I've been hearing a lot in the news lately about finding the appropriate medical response to COVID -19. Most of the talk revolves around the development of a vaccine. Vaccination stimulates the immune system in such a way that a protective immunity is built up against a particular disease. A vaccine, though, is different from a cure. Once a disease has been contracted, we look not to a preventative vaccine but to a remedial treatment. Billions of dollars are now being invested in research, and many pharmaceutical companies are racing against the clock to develop both.

The passages of Sacred Scripture speak to us this morning of a disease that attacks Christian believers, and it presents one response which is both vaccine and cure. The disease is doubt; the protective and healing response is the Word of God. The scene presented in the Gospel passage from St. Matthew centers around a boat, filled with the disciples. Throughout the Christian tradition, the boat has stood as a symbol for the Church, so what is being addressed here in dramatic fashion is the real life of every member of the Church, every believer. It speaks specifically to our struggle with doubt, even as we believe, and summons us to be healed by God's Word.

This struggle was experienced from the beginning. Consider those first disciples. Before setting out on the boat, the disciples had just witnessed the miraculous multiplication of loaves and fish; they saw firsthand the extraordinary power of the Lord Jesus, which served to move them toward faith in him. Now they find themselves in grave peril on a stormy sea, and faith gives way to doubt. As disciples of today, we, too, believe in the Lord Jesus, we surrender our lives to him, and trust in the power of his love. Yet our faith, also, often mixes with doubt when we have to confront forces far more powerful than we are. It may well be the destructive power of nature, which is all too familiar to people living on the Prairies. For many, the immediate danger is the pandemic and its repercussions on health and finances. Or how can we not think at this moment of the beloved people of Lebanon, struggling in the immediate wake of that horrifying blast in Beirut? In so many ways, faith is sorely tested in such a way that we struggle with doubt. Is the Lord near? Is he in the boat with us? Why isn't he acting? Why isn't he answering? Do we really have to handle this on our own? We don't want to doubt; but we know from experience that on our own we can neither prevent it nor heal it.

What serves as both vaccine and cure for this disease is the Word of God. The passages this morning point not only to the struggle of the believer but also to the response of God to our situation. That response is to draw near and to make His presence known. Long ago, the prophet Elijah had to flee in fear for his life and, in the passage we heard in the first reading, he is hiding in a cave. God draws near to him and assures him with His presence. The disciples are in mortal peril on the sea. Jesus draws near to them, and the sea is hushed as soon as he steps into the boat. These are but two examples of many throughout Sacred Scripture that show God coming to the rescue of His people. At the heart of them all is the divine message spoken by Jesus to his disciples at their moment of great danger: "It is I! Don't be afraid." Notice that Jesus does not tell them what he is going to do, even though he knew very well what he would do. He simply states that he is near. That is enough. "I am God and I am with you. Don't be afraid." This is how the Word of God is both vaccine and antidote to doubt and fear. It teaches us the truth of God's love and

presence, and assures us that we, like Peter, can walk across the waters of danger if we by faith allow Jesus to take us by the hand.

Now, for a vaccine to be effective, people have to be inoculated. For a treatment to work, we have to swallow the pill. If God's Word is to be both vaccine against doubt and cure for it, then we have to read it; we have to allow it to speak to us and transform us. But are we doing that? Room must be made in the schedule of every day to read and ponder at least a few pages of the Bible. In this way we inoculate ourselves against the many forces – both natural and ideological – that can infect us with the doubt that weakens faith. And if we do get the infection, turning to the divine word is the effective antidote.

To complete our reflection on today's biblical texts, a further consideration with regard to vaccines and cures can be helpful. Among the many questions posed is that of distribution. Who will receive the vaccine first? Will there be enough doses of a cure for everyone? Will poor countries be left behind? God's Word is intended for "distribution" to everyone without condition. It falls to the Church to do this by both word and witness. Yet here, too, believers can find themselves afflicted by doubt. Very often we find our efforts at evangelization met not with acceptance but rejection, not enthusiasm but indifference. This can leave us doubting, wondering if our labours are making any difference at all.

We can draw comfort and direction from St. Paul. In the second reading we hear him struggling with the same worry. He is in anguish over the fact that his own people of Israel are rejecting the Gospel. Eventually the Word of God heals his anxiety. Paul recalls all that Scripture had recorded of the gifts and promises of God to the chosen people, and eventually concludes that, because God does not revoke His call and is always faithful to His promises, He will use even this rejection for the accomplishment of his universal saving purpose (cf. *Romans*, 11). This assures us, too. Jesus, who walked on the water, Jesus who is Lord over all, will not allow the advance of the Gospel to be thwarted by human resistance, but will instead turn all things to the fulfilment of the divine plan of salvation. There is no reason to doubt. Faith alone suffices.

So with faith and confidence let us now turn to the Eucharist. In this great sacrament, Jesus comes to us across the storms we are facing and toward the doubt they engender, and says to us the same healing words that he spoke to the disciples in that boat on the Sea of Galilee: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
St. Joseph's Basilica
August 9, 2020