

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Is This You?

Two very dramatic stories today: Elijah on the mountain of God, and Matthew's unique story of Peter's walk across the water: unique, because the situation is described in all four Gospels, and only in Matthew does Peter try to emulate Jesus in making a path of the waters: a deed which is attributed to God himself in the Psalms.

Sea Sickness.

As island people we have at least two attitudes to the sea. It is our moat against invaders, when we're feeling insular; and it is our front door when we're feeling adventurous. So we count seamanship as a necessary quality, but we never forget that the sea is a formidable enemy for anyone who doesn't understand it. Israelites were not like this. They were a nomadic, continental people who kept to the dry land. The desert had its own perils, and they never ventured onto water except in dire necessity, when forced. So we have the shuddering awfulness of Noah's flood, when the sea actually came ashore, and the quaint story of Jonah, where the prophet is hurled into the sea and redeemed by the unlikely agency of "a great fish". Perhaps these archaic terror stories all relate to the day when God made his people walk through the sea, and then used it punishingly, to drown their enemies.

Tell Me To Cross The Water

Now you can hear the exact resonance of Peter's cry to Jesus from the boat. His seamanship is somewhat helpless in a head wind; but the appearance of Jesus, effortlessly walking over the waters, has made him think that there is a different way to progress. It is a revisiting of the moment where he left his boat and his trade to follow Jesus in the beginning. *If it is you...* Peter asks to be assured that it is the same Master that he first obeyed: once again he will risk everything, if only the voice is the same voice. Jesus even uses the same word: *Come*. Then Peter got out of the boat and began to walk towards Jesus across the water. This is where the story becomes a great story; because at the moment

where it might appear to be entering fantasy, reality reasserts itself: the force of the wind strikes him, and the sudden terror, and he begins to sink: *Lord, save me!* - it is like a drenching of cold water as we read.

You Stretch Out Your Hand And Save Me

Jesus is in divine mode in this story, and he does for Peter what God does for David in Ps 138, or for Israel in the Exodus. The voice Peter hears next is the voice that speaks to Thomas as he looks on the Risen One: *Man of little faith: why did you doubt?* The implication of this is clear. What we're given in this Gospel is a universal story, one which addresses our situation. The Church already knew, when this was written down, that its future lay not in familiar Palestine, but "across the sea", in the Empire of the Gentiles. The apostles had already travelled out of the Holy Land and into the foreign territories of the West. It was beyond the sea that Peter and Paul had met their deaths in Rome - giving a whole new meaning to *Tell me to come to you across the water* - and the Church was learning to trust its Lord in a new and greater theatre than the borders of Israel.

Stepping Into The Unknown

In the following of Christ we are committed to stepping out of the safe circumstances of our known world, and entering the unknown. If we expect God to be a familiar face, we have lost the plot, and need to re-read a few stories of angelic appearances - where the seers are rooted to the spot with terror. You can roll your own god, using the ingredients you would like to find: but you will surely never worship it when it's finished. I think the god people turn away from is such a creature. The real God is much too frightening to turn your back on. He rides on the wings of the hurricane, he is Lord of the pyroclastic flow, or (to use the Hebrew term) he is the one who walks on the sea. Whatever you most fear, he is its Master. This is the one Peter could not help following, even when he decided *I do not know him*. Those in the boat

said: Truly, you are the Son of God.
Fr Philip