

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

“Tell Me To Come To You Across The Water!”

There's a big title for a little article! But it is such a powerful line, that I think it deserves banner treatment.

Battling With A Heavy Sea

It has been said that the Church is “the barque of Peter”, and that this famous image from the Gospel represents the struggling Church, desperately trying to keep its head up *without Jesus being in the boat*. They see Jesus' distance, “on the mountain”, as a sign of his supposed distance from the Church after the Ascension. This is a very irreligious idea. People who are depressed and pessimistic about the future of the Church should remember the fact that Jesus and humanity are forever at one, and that all that happens to the Church is under the care of the Spirit. The Gospel assures us of that.

Back To Genesis

In the beginning, God creates light, and *separates* light from darkness. This is the first act of divine judgement on Creation: but it leaves darkness its own realm; *separated* doesn't mean *destroyed*. In the same way, God creates the vault of heaven to form the atmosphere in which the breath of life can be given; but the waters, above and below the earth, remain. They too are *separated* from the created cosmos, but not abolished. Then God makes dry land rise out of the waters, separated from the seas: but the seas remain. So around, and above, and below us *the forces of chaos endure*. In the Bible, the setting of the sun, the breaking of the storm, the flooding of the land are the irruption of chaotic forces over which only God has mastery; in humanity, they represent the chaos of death, with its cohorts, sin and suffering. Perhaps this elemental setting will help us to understand the boat story as an image of human power pitted against the elements of chaos. The sailors feel their weakness as they struggle to sail into the dark and wind. Where is Jesus? He is in the hills, praying. The last time Matthew presented him “on high” was the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, where he appears as a new and greater Moses, the Lawgiver of the New Testament. Moses too prayed on the mountain, and is constantly depicted as *ascending the mountain alone* while the crowds remain below. This is always a prelude to a *theophany*, a revelation of God: and that is surely what happens here. In sublime contrast to the disciples, Jesus,

effortlessly mastering the elements; walks on the sea. When they cry out in fear, he calls to them: *Do not fear: I AM!* - which can be translated simply as “It is I”, but which is also the divine Name revealed to Moses (again) at the beginning of his prophetic call.

Matthew's Story Of Peter

There is a special end to the story in Matthew, as Peter says to Jesus the words at the top of this page. We can now understand their full importance. Peter is not asking for the power to perform a stunt. He is asking - in the name of all of us - for the power to master the elements which threaten Creation: for power over chaos, for power over evil. I am always impressed by the fulfilment of this story, also in Matthew's gospel alone: Jesus' gift to Peter of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, with the power to bind or loose evil on earth. That gift is given precisely because of a divine revelation to Peter (*It was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven*), a revelation which enabled his profession of faith. But there is a further fulfilment: *tell me to come to you across the water* also echoes the words of Jesus in the fourth Gospel, *Someone else will bind you, and take you where you would not go*; he speaks of Peter's death, which awaits him, not in Palestine, but *across the water*, in Rome. At his calling, Peter is a fisherman, and will remain one. In his last following, he will go to Jesus by the way of the sea. *Fr Philip*