

When we speak of the story of our life, we should be aware that no story lives in isolation from other stories. Our lives interlock, and it is better to consider ourselves as constantly encountering, especially encountering the lives of other human beings. The Gospels show us Jesus constantly meeting and interacting with others. Today's story is I think particularly complex and interesting. What is its "*sitz im leben*"?

The story is unusual in that when it starts Jesus is separated from the group. In the Gospel this phrase is laden with difficulty. To be "separated from Christ" is an image of doom. And indeed the lives of the disciples have become fraught. They are making no progress, *their seamanship all adrift*.

Frustration doesn't make for good stories; it bores us because we are so familiar with it. We are used to feeling that our lives are habitually frustrated of their true tenor and scope; we fall constantly short of the success and competence we should like to enjoy. We are used to patching things up, making do and mending, getting by. Hidden in this poor stuff is the ultimate ridiculousness of our hopes, the power of the dullest facts: death and taxes.

The good story comes when we break this sad pattern, when something happens that has glory and transcendence about it. The question is: can we really believe that the world will ever break open like that, exploding into the unquestionably good, true, beautiful place we long for it to be? Or do we simply lose our time in wishful thinking? This is where the extraordinary power of our encounters with other people comes into play. It is in meeting people that our senses are alerted to the possibility of new things. Of course we can get into the way of failing to encounter others in any deep way. That is separation, and it is doom-laden. But if we allow ourselves to encounter people with the full range of our powers, then we are in touch with the very business of being alive, and things change.

The scene in the Gospel today is set at night - the time of the unconscious, the time of dreams: the time too of fear that the waking mind will not face. For Jesus, it is a time of prayer, and he is *above* the fishermen - in the hills, alone with the Father. The setting is suddenly opened to the situation of the early Church, where the followers of Christ felt his absence as they face the menaces of persecution and opposition and their own perplexity. This isn't unlikely; the Gospel was written fifty years after the Resurrection, and these emotions had indeed made their mark on the Church that kept the Gospel traditions alive before they were written.

Suddenly the frustration and fear of the story - human beings pitted against the uncertain temper of the elements - is focussed and shot through with drama. *He went towards them, walking on the lake, and they were terrified*. Encountering a man who walks on the sea at night is a source of terror because the world is breaking open in an unaccustomed way. The mention of ghosts is significant; they are in the marches between life and death. Now we are in the heartland of the Gospel, the frontier between the grave and the Resurrection; the encounter is suddenly Paschal, and shares the terror of the dark Garden of Gethsemane, where the disciples were scattered, and of the dark hillside, where from a distance away they saw themselves cut off from Christ by the terror of his death: the nails, the spear at his heart.

The words of Jesus are classical, angelic salutations: *Courage...do not be afraid*; but there is more here: *egw eimi*, I AM, which the JB translates *it is I!* but which is truly the name of God revealed to Moses from the heart of the burning bush.

I ask myself what Peter's wife, safe asleep at home in Bethsaida, would make of what happens next. Her fisherman is getting into bad company. It is not like Peter to take it into his head to do without the boat at such a moment as this. But Jesus, Peter already knows, is a danger to him. One day he will call him to come across the water to Rome, and what will happen to Peter in Rome will make this nocturnal terror pale by comparison.

Around the encountered figure of Jesus - phantom or friend, alive and dead, walking with supernal power across the waves - there is already a divine aura which will bring these fishermen to their knees. It wants two more chapters before a waking Peter will utter the words, *you are the Christ, the Son of the living God*. But in this darkened world of dreams and suggestions the unthinkable has already been expressed. Jesus will bring all of us to life in our own way, we shall all have our story to tell of our encounter with him. But it will be the same for all of us: he will ask us to trust him with our life, and what we say to him in response is the most serious question we shall ever be asked.