

Sunday Homily

9TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

9 AUGUST 2020

YEAR A

"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Matthew 14:31

Illustration

The eighteenth-century French Jesuit priest Jean-Pierre de Caussade spent the first few years of his ministry teaching at the Jesuit college in Toulouse. In 1714 he stopped teaching, and became an itinerant missionary and preacher.

In the years that followed he developed an extensive ministry of spiritual direction based at the Jesuit retreat house in Nancy, and many of the letters on the life of prayer that he wrote during those years have been preserved for us.

His most famous work, still available today, was a longer piece entitled *Abandonment to Divine Providence*. When writing about the practice of faith in our daily lives, de Caussade had this to say: "God's will desires and can always accomplish what will contribute most to our perfection on condition that we allow God to act. Faith does not doubt this. The more our senses are faithless, revolted, uncertain and in despair, the more surely faith says: 'This is God; all is well.'"

Gospel Teaching

Peter's attempt to walk on the water in Matthew's Gospel follows on immediately from the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus has dismissed the crowds and sent his disciples on ahead of him, across the lake, while he goes up a mountain to pray alone.

Early in the morning the disciples see Jesus walking towards them through the battering waves, and they cry out in fear, thinking they are seeing a ghost. He calls out to reassure them, and Peter responds, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." When Jesus does so, Peter sets out confidently, but he is soon overcome by his fear of the wind and the waves. Jesus catches hold of Peter's outstretched hand, chiding him for his lack of faith. As they get in the boat the wind drops, and the disciples worship Jesus.

This incident is paralleled in Mark's Gospel (Mark 6:45-52), but Mark has one very significant difference: there is no mention of Peter attempting to walk on the water to Jesus. So why does Matthew record this? The usual interpretation of this passage assumes that Peter would not have sunk in the waves if he had only had

enough faith, and indeed, Jesus' words would initially seem to suggest this. But the disciples' lack of faith is also implicit in Mark's version of the incident, and has not needed a description of Peter trying to walk on the water to make it so.

The American scholar Eugene Boring has suggested that Jesus' rebuke of Peter relates not to the fact that having more faith would have made walking on the water possible, but rather that Peter was demanding proof of Jesus' presence and power, rather than relying on his faith.

Boring draws a parallel between the form of Peter's words to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water"; and the words of Satan to Jesus in the wilderness temptations: "If you are the Son of God..." (Matthew 4:3-11).

In the wilderness experience, Jesus is repeatedly tempted to "prove" his divinity to the world and to himself by a spectacular display of signs and wonders. His threefold response to Satan indicates a refusal to be drawn into displays of supernatural pyrotechnics, and instead Jesus focuses consistently on the God who alone is worthy of trust and worship. By demanding a miracle, Peter has fallen prey to the temptation to seek physical proof for his faith, and he is consequently rebuked by Jesus.

Application

The message of today's Gospel passage challenges our inbuilt human tendency to demand proof for our faith; to ask that God would suspend the natural laws of his creation in order to make belief easier for us. So often we seek, not for faith, but for certainty. We have no problem when all in our lives is going smoothly; but when the "wind and waves" that are the realities of every human life threaten to swamp us – the experiences of loss, sickness and ageing that are our common lot – we find it hard to hold on to faith.

The words of de Caussade with which we began are of real encouragement here. We are urged to hold on in faith, however bleak and unpromising are our circumstances. However strong the winds or overwhelming the waves, God always wills and can do that which is for our greatest good, if only we will let him do so (cf. Romans 8:28). "This is God; all is well."