

Homily August 13, 2017

I believe that I have shared on other occasions the story of a religious experience I had as a young adult, during my last year in the military. It was in the context of a prayerful search for a deeper conviction about the truth of my Catholic Faith. The experience was of an intense sense of the presence of God, more particularly Jesus. I felt the presence of Jesus literally in the room and I felt Him speaking to my mind and heart and I knew He was likewise listening to me. It was an experience of the presence of God I had not known since I was a young child. And it was as if I was learning something new about someone I had known for a long time. I was learning, anew, Jesus' personal love for me and His mercy and care for me.

Today's Gospel described an experience in which Jesus' closest followers learned something new about Him. They had already recognized miraculous healing powers operating through Him and had recently experienced the miraculous multiplication of bread to feed the multitudes. In this experience the apostles experienced Jesus who exercised a special power over nature by walking on the water and empowering Peter to do so as well until he panicked in a moment of weakened faith.

Our first reading described an experience of God with the prophet Elijah. The passage demonstrates the common perception of God as the author of nature, and thus all sorts of strong manifestations of nature: wind, earthquake and fire could be perceived as manifestation of God, their Creator. In this case, however, Elijah finally recognized God in a tiny whispering sound. Perhaps not unlike the tiny whispering sound I experienced internally as a young adult nearly fifty years ago.

Today's Gospel presents just one experience that taught the apostles something about Jesus. There is so much more. The apostles' personal knowledge of Jesus developed through their variety of experiences with Him. They knew Him in his humanity. He had grown up in Nazareth and worked as a carpenter. They knew him as one could become tired and need to step away and rest. They knew as one how enjoyed fellowship around a meal. They knew Him as one who was compassionate, especially to the people who came out to listen to Him. They also knew as one could be blunt and forceful as He was with the scribes and Pharisees and even St. Peter in his moments of error.

But they also knew Him as a miracle worker, exercising power over nature, using Messianic titles for Himself and identifying Himself as uniquely one with the Father. Finally, they knew Him as the One who rose from the dead and as promised sent the Holy Spirit who gave them the profound interior transformation that would allow them to continue Jesus' mission of reconciliation between God and His people. He is the One

whom St. John in His Gospel would describe as eternally existent in the Holy Trinity. The apostles knew Jesus Christ as alive within themselves and in their gathering as Church. The apostles knew Jesus Christ as the one they were supposed to carry into the world and the future through His Church.

I would like to use today's Gospel as the occasion to remind ourselves of the Jesus Christ whom we are called to know, to love and to follow. In the early centuries of the Church various contradictory notions were being proposed about how Jesus existed in His humanity and divinity. The descendants of the apostles, the bishops, gathered in council to define in a succinct formula the Jesus Christ embraced and shared by the apostolic Church. In doing so they exercised their inherited authority first expressed by their predecessors who gathered in council as described in the Acts of the Apostles. In simplest language, we can identify two primary alternate strains of explanation of the divine-human that exists in Jesus Christ. Some mistakenly spoke of God merely appearing human. Others mistakenly spoke of a man who later became divine. But the Church, in council, defined Jesus Christ as one divine person possessing a complete human and divine nature. He is the second person of the Blessed Trinity of the one God. He is God as much as the Father is God or the Holy Spirit is God. Theologians have legitimately debated as to how to best describe the divine person Jesus Christ in a way that sufficiently accounts for both the human and divine nature. But no explanations answer all the questions of the interaction between the two natures. And we should be aware that there are still voices within Christianity that diminish the sense of the divine personhood of Jesus.

Going back to the original lesson of today's Gospel, we note how Peter stepped out onto the water trusting in Jesus' divine power. But when He took His eyes off Jesus, that is when his faith faltered and he began to fear.

If we are going to fully enjoy what the divine and all-powerful God Jesus Christ has to offer us, then we must keep our eyes on Him. That includes the eyes and ears of our minds and hearts. We must continually see Him as the divine source of forgiveness, redemption, the grace to do good as well as the judge who is anxious to escort us into eternity with Him.

Our Catholic Faith provides so many tools to keep our eyes on the divine and human Jesus Christ who reaches out to loves us with divine power and a perfect human and sacred heart. He sent His Holy Spirit to teach us the truth through His Church so we don't have to stumble through trial and error. He gave us the worship which is the Mass in which He joins us to His great offering on the cross and then feeds us with His Body and Blood. He forgives in the sacrament of penance. And daily He is ready

to be with us in our prayer- when we gather in assembly and when we are alone.

In our second reading St. Paul used a middle eastern device of exaggeration to express how anxious he was that his Jewish brothers and sisters would come to know Jesus Christ. Sometimes I think we manifest religious tolerance in way that appears that we are being stingy about sharing the Jesus of our Faith with others. But to better share Jesus we do have to grow in our own conviction that the Jesus Christ of the Church is real and accessible and ours.