

## Reflection for the Nineteenth Sunday

I count myself blessed for having lived near the sea for most of my life. Although, I have never made particular use of it by way of swimming or sailing, I have always found walking along the coastal paths a way to relax and to put things into perspective. A good walk along the front often helps me to clarify problems and generate ideas for trying to get things to a better place, even if, at times, solutions to problems remain elusive. Other people have told me that the seafront has helped them in that way as well. That is what the sea represents for me, a place of peace an opportunity to think and pray especially when issues seem to be closing in on me too much. So, for me there is always a connection when Jesus is by the Sea of Galilee teaching, healing and working miracles. It is a large freshwater lake which is 9 miles long, 5 miles wide and reaches a depth of over 800 feet below sea level. It is known for its abundant supply of fish and so there was an active fish trade at the time of Jesus, which some of the Apostles took part in and we can read about in the Gospels. The Lake is also subject to sudden and violent storms,<sup>1</sup> which I can attest to having stayed by the lake several times on trips to the Holy Land. So, that is part of the scene for the dramatic ‘test of faith’ which the Gospel tells us about this Sunday.

This chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel begins with the beheading of St. John the Baptist and Jesus with his disciples withdrawing to lonely place to be by themselves having received that news. However, the people find them and Jesus ministers to them culminating in the feeding of the five thousand which we heard last Sunday. After this, Jesus sends the disciples off to the other side of the lake sets about sending the people away and spends some time alone in prayer. The Church sees in these chapters of Matthew’s Gospel (Sunday’s 18-22) a narrative about God’s kingdom on earth and how the Church should be developing along those lines. In these sections there are some contemporary resonances. John the Baptist has been persecuted for witnessing to his faith and in our own time the charity *Aid to the Church in Need* recounts many instances of Christians being persecuted around the world. The community of faith gather around Jesus and he teaches and feeds them which are a foretaste of the Church teaching and feeding us in our own time. Finally, the boat which the disciples are in on the Sea of Galilee represents the Church making its way through history. The storm is the difficulties the Church faces on her pilgrim journey. The way through these storms is with faith by focussing on Jesus and not the storm. Peter as leader fails to do this as he walks towards Jesus and at times Church leaders do fail to do this and all in the Church have this weakness. When Peter realises, he is sinking he cries to Jesus who reaches out to save him, as Jesus reaches out to all of us. The Church, the community of faith, always needs to focus on Jesus who walks with us through the storms of life.

The same is true in our lives as individuals. Through our personal struggles and difficulties, we do not always recognise Jesus walking alongside the household boats we are rowing against the headwinds. The disciples in the boat think that Jesus is a ghost! The Church, the community of faith, exists to reassure us that Jesus is with us always. Often other peoples’ faith and testimony can be a great encouragement as well as prayer, the sacraments, our schools the laity, those who work for the Church, the clergy and our church buildings. All can help us keep our focus on Jesus when the great temptation is to focus on the storm – the situations that we are caught in. Maybe my walks along the seafront remind me of the Sea of Galilee and all the events in the life of Jesus and his disciples that took place there. When Jesus and Peter got back into the boat the wind dropped. Jesus is alongside, we pray never to forget to invite him in along with Peter. Then we will know, together, we will make it across to the ‘other side’.

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Bible Dictionary, Scott Hahn (General Editor), First Edition 2009, Doubleday Religion