

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**June 20, 2021 Streaming Mass**  
**12th Sunday of Year B Mark 4:35-41**

Who is this One who can control the winds and the waves, the weather about which we talk so much about, but about which we can do so little? What is it that He provides, what does He promise, what does He offer? Is religion simply believing that we have God on our side, at our beck and call? Or, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, is it to seek to be on God's side, never so confident of our own plans and strategies that we can presume to claim God's endorsement for them, but always striving that we conform to God's Holy Will? Is faith's purpose just to provide us smooth sailing through life, or rather, to open us up to travel distant seas with courage, hope and perseverance? Is religion, then, just a matter of trying to control life, of keeping safe, or rather, a matter of letting go, of taking risks, of being willing to search for God in some unlikely places?

Today's Gospel of Jesus and the disciples in the storm-tossed boat reminds me of an interview I once saw some years ago on the evening news with a Buddhist monk who had fled from Vietnam. First he had been harassed by the right-wing government, and then after the war by the Communists, who finally forced him to leave his country. But in the years since his departure, he said, he had worked with many "boat-people," people who had been forced to flee the tyranny of Communism in flimsy, overcrowded crafts that were hardly seaworthy. He said that many of those with whom he spoke recounted this same remarkable tale. The boat people reported to him that during their journey it would often happen that the sea would suddenly get very rough as a storm arose, and the darkened skies would threaten to destroy the very flimsy boat. People would then begin to move about the boat in terror and panic, only increasing the likelihood of the ship sinking. But, the "boat-people" told him that often enough if there was just one person who kept calm through all that turmoil and panic, that sense of calm would be contagious and would spread to the other panic-stricken voyagers. The result was that all would, then, stay in one place, and not jump up and down in terror, lessening the possibility that their panic-state would exacerbate the threat of the storm, and thereby destroy their boat and themselves. The point the monk was trying to make in telling the story was to show what role the person who remains sane and calm might serve in a society or in a world gone haywire.

Today's Gospel gives us the example of Jesus who is calm, so calm that he appears to be asleep, while His disciples are panic-stricken that they might perish. It is from that calm, that peace, that union with God whom He calls Father, that He

proceeds to tame the threat of wind and wave. What message is there for us in all of this? In a sense we all travel through life in some boat of our own construction, of our imagination, in some fragile vessel that we hope will get us from one place to another, there will provide a measure of security and comfort. It may be our family, a particular relationship, our career, our position in society, even the church, whatever. But our place in none of these is so secure that it will not, at some time or another, be tossed by the unsettling winds of change, by waves of depression, by the swelling seas of doubt, or by the lashing rains of adversity. Our little lifeboats—all those endeavors, those institutions, in which we invest so much of ourselves—those accomplishments which we hope will show we count for something, those dreams and ventures we trust will bring us happiness—our little rafts on the perilous seas of life are all too threatened by life's misadventures. At any moment it may seem we're in danger of going under, of losing all that we have. But always we have to remember that it is our inner panic, our lack of inner peace and calm, that only increases the danger of the external threat.

When we are threatened how do we behave? Almost instinctively, we tend to react. When threatened we become fearful, we get angry, we lash out, we blame other people. We react, rather than respond. We get caught up in the whirl of events; we are sucked into the vortex, into the whirlpool of anger, hostility and spite; we react to accusation with recrimination, to violence with more violence, and to threat with a false sense of bravado.

It is a sad fact of life that sick people can make healthy people sick, that mentally ill people can drive sane people crazy—if we let them; if we let ourselves be caught up in the whirlwind of animosity. Often the best advice in the midst of a raging conflict might be to try to “detach” ourselves from all that is going around us—not that we try to escape or avoid the conflict, nor that that we fail to hear what people are saying amidst all their shouting, but not to take it always so personally. It may be to recognize that not always, but often enough, when someone is attacking us, their words may say more about their own pain, their own sense of loss, of bereavement, their own disappointment with life, than what they actually are saying in the charges being leveled against us. And how often in some argument is it that that the lowest common denominator is the level at which the discussion takes place—that when parents, for example, are arguing with a child about the child's behavior, they can wind up talking like the child?

The Gospel does not promise us the possibility of control over our lives, over our environment, but it does offer the possibility of peace, of calm in the midst of chaos; of being able to respond appropriately to the situation, and not just of reacting instinctively; of knowing what really matters in life, where the real threats are and how

to deal with them. In the story of "Alice in Wonderland" as the Queen of Hearts goes about lopping off heads, one of the characters runs about shouting, "keep your head." Let that be our prayer—to keep our heads when all those around us seem to be losing theirs.

That prayer can become a reality if we have learned to make the pattern of Jesus' life more and more part of our own—if at the center of our lives is the peace that comes from a union, from a connection with God, from being grounded in God. We need then to have our lives centered, centered upon the Ultimate Reality, centered upon God, and not have our energy dissipated in so many disconnected activities and ventures that we really do not know what we are about. Then, external circumstances can come to dictate who and what we are; then we can become so caught up in the welter of events that we end up "burning the candle at both ends." The Gospel of Judas Christ does not promise access to some form of external manipulation, but internal transformation. And, paradoxically, as the Buddhist monk's story illustrates, what we are inside goes a long way to affecting how we deal with what is happening to us on the outside. If we react instinctively, so often we only make matters worse. But, if we respond with the mind of Christ, we may indeed halt the rising tide of charge and recrimination, and overcome what is merely a threat and no real danger at all.

So, in this morning's Eucharist, let us pray for what Jesus does promise—not just smooth sailing through life, but the gift of his own Holy Spirit. Let us pray that with the power of that Spirit our lives may be transformed—that we can live in peace and know where are true security lines; that that peace might be contagious, so as to calm those around us who, in their fear and panic, are in danger of hurting themselves and others, in their vain attempts at a bellicose or narcissistic security. Let us find our peace, our security in being grounded in God, in God who comes to save us from the inside out.