



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

### ***Walking on water***

*Readings: 1 Kings 9: 9, 11-13, Ps 84, Romans 9: 1-5, Matthew 14: 22-33*

The element of Water plays a huge part in the story of our salvation, that part which is contained in the Holy Scriptures and that part which ministers to us in the Sacraments of the Church.

The Hebrew mind was ever ambivalent about water. Without it we cannot live – and it acquires a peculiar premium among a nomadic desert people. But also there is the folk memory of the great inundation of the Flood and the experience of the wild, untameable and, frankly at times, terrifying ocean. All that the ancient tribes knew was that if you dug down far enough there was water. If you went to the coast, there was water. If you looked up into the sky there was a blue bowl which restrained the deluge but occasionally leaked water. It followed that all life was somehow suspended between this element and could be swept away at any moment.

Paradoxically, therefore, the prerequisite of life became also a symbol of chaos and disintegration and death. 'The waters of death encompassed me...' cries the Psalmist.

Water also, like much of the Biblical imagery has a twofold meaning. There is the literal – eg the Flood sweeps across the earth and destroys all but

those in the Ark. But also, the Flood washes away the filth of sin that brought God's judgement upon Man. The Ark of Salvation becomes a metaphor for the Church which rescues us from the waters of death and judgement.

A couple of other examples..... Jonah is cast into the raging ocean to calm the storm, arisen because of his disobedience and spends three days in the belly of the great sea creature. Jonah is a metaphor for Israel who, because of their disobedience will be unshipped and be consigned to the exile in Babylon whose god, Dagon, is a fish god – also worshipped in Assyria.

New Testament.... The Wedding at Cana. The water which is turned into wine is indeed water. But, being part of the purification rites, stands for the water of baptism which, transformed by the Word of God, which is Christ, becomes the wine of the feast, the baptised become the receivers of the Blessed Sacrament.

Enough, I hope, to whet your appetite. But enough already anyway.

Today we see Jesus walking on the water. We have elsewhere seen Him calm the storm and display His authority over this wild element of chaos and death. Now we see Him asserting His majesty by walking upon it. It is both a physical miracle and a spiritual statement. Peter wants to do the same and is invited to get out of the boat and walk across the gap to Jesus. At first, full of confidence and bravado, he succeeds. But, suddenly made fearful by the rising wind, his confidence deserts him and he begins to sink. The rest of the story unfolds. 'O, man of little faith etc..', Jesus rescues him and chastises him.

A little unfair, I always think. After all Peter was the only one who risked it. I didn't notice the other disciples queuing up for a turn. Anyway, what do we make of it. There is the literal physical miracle which you either accept or

you don't. I have no difficulty in accepting the reality that the Word who made the ocean could control it and walk upon it.

But underneath this astonishing display of the divine in the human that is Jesus Christ – just like last week's revelation at the Transfiguration – there is more.

The little fishing boat, the ship of the church, had set off without Jesus on board and was, unsurprisingly struggling with the elements.

The miracle happens in the fourth watch of the night. This is between 3am and 6am – a time of traditional intense activity of the forces of the dark.

Initially the disciples think therefore that they are seeing a ghost, a phantasm. They are literally 'spooked'. Peter's challenge to Jesus is a bold one if it is you then let me come to you across the water. He is putting his body and his life on the line here. We should not underestimate the courage involved. And he learns a valuable lesson too. All the time he is confidently looking to Jesus and trusting Him, he remains afloat, sharing the divine power over chaos and death. The moment he starts to worry more about the forces of the dark than trusting in and looking to Jesus – down he goes. Not just a lesson for him, I might add.

Finally, for the moment anyway, there will be a time in the not too distant future when Peter will have to exercise his ministry of authority over the whole world. He will not be able to sit comfortably or uncomfortably in the little huddle of the disciples in the home church of his people. He will have to step out to Jesus across the wild waves of the dark forces of the pagan empires and assert the power of the One who is. And proclaim the little wind-battered fishing boat of the Galilee to be the Ark of Salvation, the Universal Church.