

Tuesday of the 18th Week of the Year, II, August 5, 2014 (#408)

In the Book of Esther, this young Jewess is made Queen of Persia, the main wife of king Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes. Around that time, Haman convinced Ahasuerus to have all the Jews in the capital city of Susa executed, and Esther's uncle Mordecai told her that it was her duty to plead with the king for the lives of her countrymen, since it was for that very reason that God had placed her on the throne in the first place. Initially she balks, since anyone who enters the king's presence uninvited incur the death penalty unless he extends the royal scepter, and she has not been invited to see him for 30 days. However, she agrees to go if Mordecai and the other Jews in the city pray and fast for her, which they do, thus leading to a successful intervention. Now it might seem barbaric that the queen herself needed to take her life in her hands to see the king. However, we see similar ideas concerning the Lord himself in the Old Testament. For instance, we hear in the Torah that not only is the high priest the only person allowed to enter into the Holy of Holies and see the Ark of the Covenant, and that only once a year. Even then, he must first fill the room with incense, so that the direct vision of the Lord does not strike him dead. A later incident shows that God means business, when King David is having the Ark transferred, and one attendant extends his hand to steady the Ark as it is leaning atop the ox cart, at which point he is struck dead. Clearly, one does not simply go walking into the presence of the Lord of the Universe, before whom angels tremble.

Thus do the words of Jeremiah, from our first reading, make sense. It is from one of the rare affirming chapters in this long book, although the passage begins by the Lord stating that Israel's wound is incurable because of their great guilt and the multitude of their sins. However, that statement serves as an introduction to how the Lord, by his own free will, is going to choose to restore his people, as we see in the second half of the reading, so that from there will be the sound of the laughter of happy men. Still, after that and other positive references, including to a new, Jewish ruler, the passage concludes as follows: "When I summon him, he shall approach me; how else should one take the deadly risk of approaching me? says the Lord." Even so, Jeremiah is able to conclude, "You shall be my people, and I will be your God." Thus, while the Lord continues to love his people, and desires to bless them, even after their egregious sins, they still need to keep their distance, lest they become too familiar with him, to their ultimate undoing.

This pericope, in its own way, indicates how much God wants to forgive the sins of his people, a sentiment reflected in our responsory, Psalm 102: "The Lord looked down from his holy height, and from heaven he beheld the earth, to hear the groaning of the prisoners, to release those doomed to die." We had all been imprisoned by the devil through original sin, but the Father sent his only-begotten Son to free us from this ancient curse. It is this same God of the Old Testament that we see in our gospel reading today, from Saint Matthew. Now at first it seems like the same old thing: Jesus approaches the apostles on the water, and they are simply terrified, thinking that their lives are in even more danger now than from the storm. However, Jesus hastens to reassure them, "Get hold of yourselves! It is I. Do not be afraid!" The perceptive reader will note that Jesus here uses the divine name, I AM, applying it to himself, which attribution makes sense in light of his walking on the water, and his eventual calming of the sea. However, only in Matthew does something else interesting happen. Peter, emboldened by his Master's

words, asks Jesus to invite him to join him on the surface of the turbulent water. Jesus, like King Ahasuerus, says, "Come!" and so Peter leaves the safety of the boat and finds himself treading on the sea. Too bad his fear overcomes his faith, and he begins to sink, occasioning Jesus rescuing him and restoring him to the boat, who takes the occasion to chide him for his faltering trust. Clearly, one must become slowly inured before being able to attain familiarity with the King of the Universe.

Still, before we take Peter to task, we need to recall that we, unlike Jesus, have not walked on water before, and so have not earned the right to correct Peter on this subject. Indeed, in all four gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles, with all the miracles the apostles perform, there is only one who actually walks on water, and that during a storm: Peter. Thus, we need to see this glass of seawater as half-full, and focus on Simon's faith rather than the moment when it ran out, which simply indicates that his trust was not yet perfect. After all, as the earlier examples from the Old Testament reflect, the Lord is not the sort of deity that one simply stops by to visit on the way to the store. However, Peter nerved himself to ask to approach Jesus, and then had the courage to do so, showing the level of depth of their friendship before the incident, which relationship would only have grown as a result of this occasion, helping these two men bond in a way that the other landlubbers could not intrinsically appreciate.

Now in the Bible, the sea tends to represent chaos and sin, that primordial power that God tamed through the Holy Spirit, and set limits for. Still, Adam and Eve allowed that power to reinvade their lives, and through them all creation. The fact that Jesus does not simply walk on the sea, but can actually calm it, teaches us that he is not only the Savior of the world, liberating creation from sin, but that, in our own individual lives, he can calm the breakers of things like lust and anger, which so often lead to actual sins. However, for us really to get a bead on advancement in the spiritual life, we need to have the courage to leave our comfort zone, our small boat, and join Jesus on the shifting water. It is easy to miss the detail at the beginning of the reading that "Jesus insisted that his disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side." These experienced fishermen would have seen the storm coming and balked at the crossing; still, obedient to their Master, they got in anyway and hoped for the best. Jesus directs us in the same way, by stages, to leave the solidity of the shore and to move onto the at-times boiling sea. It might seem foolish to do so, but it is the only way to get to the other side, which represents heaven. The boat, of course is the Church, the bark of Peter. While the wind may rage at times, we have no reason to fear, as long as we are following the Vicar of Christ.

You see, while some days the sea may be busy, and formidable, indicating the need to fight against the presence of sin in our lives; at other times it does calm down, so that that wind, which then is the Holy Spirit, is able to push our boat ahead, as long as the sails are open. How do we do that in our soul? Through growing in our personal relationship with Jesus, through prayer and service. We encounter him inside through faith, and then serve him externally through love, thus building hope that we will in fact get across this fickle sea of life to the firm shore on the other side. We can stay on our own side, but then there is no growth in friendship with Jesus. We might be afraid to approach the Lord of the Universe; but this Almighty God has become one of us, so that he has now become approachable. Indeed, the very incarnation is the "Come!" that Jesus extends to Peter today, and through him to us, asking us to move to a deeper level of

commitment, trust and relationship. May we, then, follow the example of Simon, the only disciple to walk on water, learning from him that if we step out in faith, Jesus will be there to welcome us. We don't want to presume to approach him uninvited; but in fact he is standing there, the Rock of our salvation, with arms open, waiting for us to respond to his loving invitation.