

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Aug 5th 2014

In the first reading, there is the profound realization that, like the people receiving Jeremiah's message, our wound might be "incurable." We might find ourselves in a place where we are "stuck" or in a rut. Our habits, our patterns, our sins have piled up. Healing or a new direction simply doesn't seem possible. Then, the good news comes. God will "rebuild" us and "restore" us. The covenant God made with the chosen people will be renewed in us: "You shall be my people, and I will be your God."

The gospel plays out the story in a little more detail. The disciples find themselves, on their way to meet Jesus, caught in a storm. A storm is a great image for the troubles we find ourselves in, or get ourselves into. A storm is violent and scary. It is a symbol of being out of control. The forces swirling around us and coming at us seem overwhelming. Each of us can come up with a number of examples of storms in our lives.

Then, Jesus appears. Like the disciples, we are not sure it is Jesus - because we are so troubled by the storm. But, he has a familiar and confirming greeting: "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." That is how we know it is Jesus. In the midst of the messiest things going on in our lives, Jesus is there asking us to not let fear take over and to put our trust in him.

So, Peter tests out the invitation. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." We often test Jesus that way. Instead of saying, "Okay, Lord, I won't be afraid," we say, in one way or another, "Prove it to me." So, Jesus continues the invitation: he says, "Come."

Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water, toward Jesus. It is always amazing what can happen when we get out of our boat, being tossed by a storm, and move toward Jesus. Walking on water? Yes, we are being assured, we can get to Jesus, when we hear him invites us - no matter what.

But, now the story gets very realistic. Here's where the problem becomes familiar to us. Peter becomes focused on the storm. When he saw "how strong the wind was he became frightened;" and he took his eyes off of Jesus and he sank. Isn't that just what we tend to do in our storms? We notice the wind and the waves and we take our eyes off of Jesus, and we sink. For a whole variety of reasons, we let ourselves be on our own. And, on our own we just can't do it. We can't make it to Jesus, while we take our eyes off of him and become full of fear. Loving generously, sacrificing ourselves for others, having bold courage to resist evil, being prophetic in support of those in need, healing a difficult relationship, sometimes just getting through the routine of a challenging day, all become too much for us and we sink.

Fortunately, Peter cries, "Jesus, save me!" That's what we need to do when we get in that situation. Of course, Jesus reminds us that the root of our problem is that we have so little faith in his presence and we quickly take our eyes off of him, when we get into trouble.

Can it really be that easy to keep our eyes on Jesus? It can be. It is. Can it really make a difference? It can. All we need to do is to try it. And, when we get scared, we need to remember not to take our eyes off of Jesus. It takes practice, but there are plenty of little storms to practice on. When we experience his presence, we will experience the power he can give us to walk on water toward him.

We can all pray for the desire in concrete circumstances.

"Lord, help me to not take my eyes off of you when I come home from work tonight, so that I can really focus on my family and their needs. Being aware of your presence with us, I won't get impatient or self-absorbed or selfish in some way."

"Lord, the care you are asking me to give in this situation is so much and it can frighten me and become so overwhelming. Let me put my trust in you and keep my eyes on your love for me and your promise of your encouraging fidelity, no matter what I have to face."

"Lord, it is like I'm stuck in an addiction. I keep doing what I don't really want to do and it hurts me and others. Help me get out of this habit, this pattern, this boat - even though I feel I have to run to it or cling to it in the most difficult times. Let me come to you, and you alone. I want to surrender my fear, in the real hope that you are offering me freedom, your love, and the grace to love others as you have loved me."

Andy Alexander, S.J.