Sermon for Service of Holy Communion in Chota Nagpur Cathedral, Ranchi, India

Trinity 10 Sunday August 13th 2023; Gospel Reading: St Matthew 14.22-33

sermon preached by The Most Reverend Dr Michael Jackson, archbishop of Dublin

*But at once Jesus spoke to them: Take Heart! I am; do not be afraid* St Matthew 14.27

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN …

We are accustomed to thinking of Jesus doing things to help and improve the life of other people. He heals the sick, he teaches the crowds, he feeds the hungry, he encourages the flagging in their lives, in their self-belief and in their relationship with God. But sometimes we forget that Jesus is God, so easy, so natural is our relationship with him as ‘one of us.’ In today’s Gospel, Jesus has just completed a full day of healing and feeding others, stubbornly refusing to let the disciples send the people away to fend for themselves. This is not what his and their duty of care is; this is not how God and God’s disciples treat those who are also part of God’s creation. Finally and not surprisingly, Jesus gets the chance to say goodbye to the crowd and to climb the mountain to pray, to commune with his Father in heaven while he lives the life of human and divine service on earth. He too lives out the prayer he taught his disciples at their request to have a designated, branded prayer: *on earth as it is in heaven.* On earth he needs regularly to connect and reconnect with The Father in heaven. The work he came to earth to do and the person he came to earth to be asks this of him; he needs this natural sustenance as he is at the full interpenetration of two natures.

THE SURPRIZE OF GOD

It is always important that God should surprize us. To us in today’s Gospel it seems that he has left the disciples to drown as he goes off to pray, that he is being so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use, as the phrase goes. But this is not what is happening. It would seem that the headwind on the lake was such that the disciples in the boat made very little progress. Somehow they kept being driven back again and again to the shore. And these were not inexperienced sailors. Fishing was their craft. This was their lake. In whatever way Jesus walked towards them, they remembered it as his walking on the water. The important moment in the story is where they mistake him for a ghost and feel the need to test him, to find out if he is for real. What Jesus says to them in response is more than his saying that the Jesus they know and have known is back with them and that all is now safe and well. He is, in fact, telling them that he is God and, in the understanding of who God is and what God does in those days, he has control over the elements of nature. Not only can he ride the waves; he can also walk the water. This ought not to surprize us because, if we move our attention to St John’s Gospel, The Word was in the beginning and The Word not only was with God but The Word was God. The Christ was The Creator. This Jesus is God Incarnate.

What Jesus actually said was an undisputable echo of Exodus 3.13: *God answered, I am that I AM. Tell them that I AM has sent you to them.* And here we have: *Take heart! I AM; do not be afraid.* (St Matthew 14.27) While thoroughly striking and in so many ways unexpected, this reference to the God of Jewish revelation ought not to surprize us because St Matthew’s Gospel draws on so much of what we now call The Old Testament to give it shape and expression. Here we go a lot further, however, than we did in The Sermon on The Mount where Jesus was the new Moses. Jesus has divine and elemental powers over nature. The disciples are right to be scared. Good relationships are restored, everyone is back on track but they will not be able to take Jesus for granted as they may well have done before – literally to their peril.

AND WHAT ABOUT US?

What is there in this for us? First there is the recognition that we too are disciples and we like to identify with the Jesus we know and get to know; we, however, need to keep growing. Secondly, we need to be open to pain and fear in the life of faith however and whenever it hits us; we follow in the footsteps, wet and dry, of The First Disciples. Thirdly, we need to keep open the windows on the God of the big picture, the God who is Jesus and the Jesus who is God; we always need to re-focus and re-centre on God Incarnate and not simply the benign human Jesus of Nazareth.

The story involving all the disciples, and then Peter in particular, takes us to the heart of the God of nature. Nature is a force we can today harness but it is not a force we can ultimately control or impede. All we need to do is to remember the term: natural disasters which still happen worldwide, day and daily. There are many other forces in our world today that were not even on the menu in the days of the first disciples but the forces of nature never go away. In fact, they are accentuated in the time of climate change. We too need The Spirit of God to bring us back to a realization and a celebration that the great I AM is with us in the person of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man.

St Matthew 14.33: *And the men in the boat fell at his feet, exclaiming, You must be the Son of God.* At that stage he simply did not need to reply: *I AM.* They already knew.