

Joseph began taking swimming lessons when he was not quite *four years old*. To me, that was both amazing and a little unnerving. His mother and I would go to the pool and watch him. Our first day there, one of the lifeguards noticed us watching our son nervously. She told us most parents are nervous, and that we seemed to be taking it rather well.

But Joseph was completely fearless. He jumped right in like he'd been swimming for years. Of course he had on a life preserver. Even so, he didn't seem to be the least bit afraid. When he got out at the end of his lesson, he came and told us that he went swimming all by himself. He would hold on to one of those noodle things and paddle all up and down the pool. And he was very proud of that. I told him how amazed I was that he even went in the deep end. But for him the entire pool was a deep end. All of it is over his head. And it's not quite the complete truth to say that he went swimming all by himself. His swimming teacher was there with him. She was about 20 years old or so, probably home from college for the summer and this was her summer job. I had the feeling that her presence there in the pool with Joseph was a big part of his being able to do this. He simply trusted her. He somehow knew that this person, who

is bigger than him, older than him, stronger than him and wiser than him made his being there all right. He knew that there was nothing to fear as long as she was there with him.

I remember taking swimming lessons when I was about six or seven. I did pretty well. Except for one day. It was time to learn how to jump off the diving board. The diving board was about four feet or so above the water which was 12 feet deep. I was scared. The swimming teacher then was also a young woman. She was treading water just below the diving board. She wanted us to jump off and she would catch us! I didn't like the way that looked. I kept thinking "how is *she* going to catch me? It's not going to work!" I stood there for a long time. Other kids formed a line at the back of the diving board. These apparently experienced kids had grown impatient and began yelling at me, "come on, kid, GO!" I wouldn't go. I couldn't see that swimming teacher ever being able to catch me. I didn't jump off the diving board. I went back and climbed down the ladder. I was a little humiliated, but at least I didn't drown. And then, other kids jumped off the board, and the teacher caught them all right.

Something similar to these two illustrations is happening in the passage from Matthew's Gospel we heard this morning. In the well-known scene of Jesus walking on the water, Peter steps out of the boat to walk on the water to Jesus. But he hesitates and begins to sink. He calls out to Jesus to save him. Jesus holds out his hand and lifts Peter up, but says to him, "O ye of little faith, why did you doubt?"

At first, it looks like the theme of this passage is that we ought to have more faith. Peter seems to need more faith so he wouldn't have started sinking. But that could be a wrong interpretation of this passage. Of course we should all have deeper faith. For us "arrival point" in terms of our faith. No one among us could say "my faith is sufficient, my faith is deep enough." But the focus of this scene is not on us, not on what we could do if only we had more faith. The point of the passage is the identity of Jesus.

The image of the apostles in the boat being tossed about on the sea is an image of the Church in its relation to the surrounding culture. In the boat the apostles are jostled by the waves and the wind is against them. Likewise, the Church has

known great conflict and persecution throughout its history. It's an appropriate image.

But this account of the disciples being in a boat tossed about by the stormy sea is the second such account in Matthew's Gospel. The first one is in chapter 8. There, Jesus has just healed Peter's mother-in-law and He and the disciples were leaving. A great crowd surrounds them and Jesus decides to cross to the other side of the sea. [Matt 8:23-27].

Notice the similarities and the differences. In Matthew chapter 8 Jesus gets into the boat with the disciples. The storm comes up and threatens their safety and they call upon Jesus to save them. Jesus asks them why they were afraid and calls them "men of little faith". And when Jesus calms the storm, the disciples are left questioning among themselves concerning the identity of Jesus: "What sort of man is this", they ask, "that even the winds and sea obey him?"

Now Matthew includes this second account of the disciples on the rough and stormy sea. Only this time, Jesus is not with them. That presents a problem. Aren't we supposed to understand that Christ is present in His Church? Doesn't the risen Christ Himself say, at the very end of Matthew's Gospel,

when he is commissioning the apostles to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, and to baptize, and to teach all that He taught them, “I am with you always, to the end of the age”?

Very likely, Jesus saw a teaching opportunity. The twelve disciples don't seem to understand who Jesus truly is. They didn't get it the first time in the boat when He was right there with them. Maybe this time, if they go out to sea on their own, it will open their eyes.

Now the interesting thing to notice about this is of course that Jesus comes to them walking on the sea. We might notice that story is about Jesus being able to defy the law of gravity. But Matthew's original audience probably would not. Matthew's Gospel was originally written for Jewish converts to Christianity who knew Hebrew Scriptures. To the Jewish mind, the sea represented something much more than a threat to boaters. The “waters” referred to in the Old Testament represent dark forces of chaos, which only God himself is able to control. The waters represent disorder, which threatens the goodness of God's created order. Only God is able to hold the waters back, to prevent them from bringing devastation to humanity. This is

expressed many times in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms. Psalm 77:16 says “The waters saw thee, O God; The waters saw thee, they were afraid: The depths also trembled”. God alone is able to subdue the waters.

And here we see Jesus coming to the apostles walking on the raging sea. It’s an image of the Church alone in the world without its Lord, subject to persecution and chaos and disorder. But Jesus rises above it all and walks freely unscathed. Only God could do that.

Furthermore, when the disciples see Jesus walking on the water and they’re terrified, not comforted. And the first thing Jesus says to them also identifies Him as God. This gets lost in translation to English. The English translation has Jesus say, “Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid”. The original Greek uses the words “*ego eimi*” for “it is I”. Now, the literal translation of “*ego eimi*” is “I am”. “I am” is introduced in the Book of Exodus, when God sends Moses to the Israelites and Moses asks Him who shall I say sent me. God says to Moses tell them “I AM” sent you and that is my name. Matthew’s original audience would have picked up on this right away. Here Jesus

identifies Himself to the disciples using the name reserved for God alone.

The key to it all is when Peter says to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water”. He’s not really sure the person he is talking to is the Lord, is he? *If it is you?* Peter’s response to Jesus is the problem. Peter saw Jesus do what only God could do, that is, to control the waters. And he heard Jesus’ use God’s name to identify himself. And Peter’s response is that he wants proof. Peter knew that they had left Jesus back on the shore. He couldn’t be with them now. Peter’s lack of faith was not so much that he doubted he would be able to walk on the water as Jesus did. His lack of faith was doubting that Jesus is God incarnate. His mistake was not trusting in who Jesus claims to be.

We might find ourselves in a Church battered about by the winds and waters of a chaotic, disorderly and unwelcoming culture. We might believe that Jesus was left back in history, like Peter thought Jesus was left back on the beach. He couldn’t possibly be here now any more than he could have walked on water to the apostles’ boat. But Jesus got into the boat with the

disciples and the wind stopped. The disciples then worshipped Jesus and declared that he truly is the Son of God.

Is the Church ever going to be free from persecution? Not in this world. But we must believe both that Jesus is the Son of God and that He is present with us in His Church to the end of the age. That is where faith begins. The storms and winds will come, but it is by our steadfast faith in Him that we will endure to the end. Amen.