

Faith vs Fear

Homily by Father Robert Gillelan

I like St. Teresa of Ávila's comments regarding St. Peter in this gospel. This is what the saint tells us.

"I have often thought that St. Peter lost nothing by throwing himself into the sea, even though later he was afraid. These first impulses are a great thing."

Those first impulses of faith that St. Peter had—that impulse of faith, the trust in the Lord, and the urge to step out of the boat—were a great thing.

But then it all fell apart in the middle when fear overtook faith. But in the end, Jesus stretched out his hand and saved St. Peter from drowning, saved by the very hand of God.

I think there's something that we want to see here. Maybe something that helps to explain why faith is hard to come by when it is competing with fear.

But first of all, let's consider that before Jesus walked on water, Peter and the other disciples witnessed numerous miracles of Jesus. And the thing about all of these miracles is that the disciples were basically spectators to these miracles.

They were not asked to be participants. This is the list of miracles that Jesus performed in the sight and presence of Peter and the disciples.

Cleansing the leper, healing the centurion's servant, healing Peter's mother-in-law, calming the storm and sea, healing two possessed by demons, healing the paralytic, raising Jairus' daughter, healing two blind men, a mute man, and healing a man with a withered hand, then feeding 5,000 people, and then Jesus walks on water and invites Peter to do the same.

How could one not, after witnessing all of those miracles, come to understand the truth of the name of Jesus? He is the Son of God. He has shown His hand.

He has shown that He has power over human illness. He has shown that He has power over spiritual, demonic evil. Power over nature. And now, walking on the water, He shows that He has all the power over the laws of physics. So how is it that in the end, Jesus says to Peter, “Oh, you of little faith. Why did you doubt?”

As I said, faith and fear compete.

And one of the things I think we want to remember about that is that Jesus said that fear is useless. What is needed is trust. I think the other translation is, “Do not be afraid, just have faith.”

For us human beings, that's a pretty big ask. Because we are actually hard wired for fear.

The part of the brain that deals with fear is the amygdala. And the amygdala coordinates our bodies' rapid response to fear. That's hard wired in us. So as St. Teresa of Ávila says, the initial impulse of Peter to get out of the boat to go to Jesus was good. But then the amygdala got active.

And Peter became aware of the wind that was blowing, the waves and the darkness of the sea that wanted to swallow him up in death.

Fear overtook him. And that fear overtook his faith. He lost his focus on Jesus, the source of his salvation.

But Jesus did not abandon him. Jesus was there to save him by reaching out his hand and saving him.

Clearly, the theological role of the story for us is to be aware that we do not allow our fears to compromise our own faith. To do that, I think we actually have to practice.

This is one of the reasons why perhaps it was hard for Peter before all of this. Remember, Peter and the other disciples were merely spectators

through all of these miracles that Jesus was doing. Now, Jesus asked him to be a participant, to be the object of what he was about to do. So Peter had to muster his own faith and trust and courage in Jesus.

And as Saint Teresa said, he did it for a little bit. And then he lost sight of Jesus.

And fear overcame him. And he sank.

But again, he rejoiced that Jesus was there to save, and so, in the end, it's a win, really, for everybody.

But I think that's a message for us. To be aware that fear can have a very compromising effect on our life of faith. Which is why Jesus says, fear is useless. What we need is more trust in him.

And so, let us especially think about that as we live our life of faith. And so, let us pray that, as Saint Teresa says, we want to follow that impulse of faith and trust and remember to stay focused on Jesus.

Especially when the waves of fear sweep over us. When the winds of doubt blow through our minds.

And when the sea of hardships tries to drown us. May we learn to follow that impulse of faith and trust in Jesus.

So, like those disciples, we may also say, "Truly, you are the Son of God."