

HOMILY SUNDAY 19 – A (Homily 02)

“The Sounds of Silence”

(1 Kings 19:9a, 11-13a; Psalm 85; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:22-33)

A group of tourists took the tram up the mountain in Jasper in the summer time. They then climbed up and over the nearest peak, and found themselves in Marmot Basin where the ski lodge is busy all winter. There was no one else around, and above all, not a sound. There was no plane, no traffic, no birds, not even the whisper of a breeze. There was only silence, a silence so prominent that it was unnerving for this group of tourists. They had never had that experience before in their lives. It was an experience that naturally led them to think of prayer, the kind of prayer that the readings speak about today.

In the readings for this 19th Sunday in Ordinary time, we are invited to listen to God in the silence of our hearts, in contemplative prayer.

Actually, the readings today teach us much about prayer. We are invited to deepen our prayer life by imitating four models or teachers of prayer: St. Peter, St. Paul, Elijah and finally, Jesus.

In the gospel, we are shown Peter at prayer. With the other disciples, he is struggling with a storm in his life. Within that storm, Jesus is there, and Peter is the one who calls out to him, who leads the band of disciples in prayer. His first prayer, however, is somewhat proud prayer, from his head. It is actually a command to Jesus to make him walk on water, as Jesus is doing. Jesus complies, and Peter has the faith to walk on water, something no one else has ever done. Perhaps he is filled with pride at what he is doing, takes his eyes off Jesus, turns back to show off a little to his companions, feels the wind, and suddenly begins to sink. Then his prayer changes – it comes from the depths of his being now, from his need. It is just three words: “Lord, save me.” This is sincere prayer as he has never prayed before. Peter teaches us to trust that God is in our storms, in difficult times, and to pray from the heart.

Next, in the second reading, we hear Paul’s anguish over his brother Israelites. They have been given so much by God, were so favored by God, given so many blessings, yet they failed to respond. What they were missing was faith in Jesus Christ, and the humility to repent, to change their stubborn ways, to see their false pride, selfishness and stubbornness for what it was and reach out to God for forgiveness and healing. We learn from Paul that prayer must be based on self-

awareness, on the knowledge of God as love and of ourselves as a sinful people in need of forgiveness and healing.

Then we turn to the first reading where we see Elijah at prayer. Here we learn to go beyond the all too present tendency to equate faith with sensational religious experiences, apparitions, visions and other such phenomena. Elijah experiences the extraordinary events of a hurricane and an earthquake, but God is not in those events. Then there is - sheer silence. Elijah wraps himself in his cloak and steps outside to encounter God in that sheer silence. Elijah teaches us to pray the prayer of contemplation, to listen to God in the silence of our hearts, to trust that God is perhaps most experienced in not seeing, not feeling, not thinking anything. That is the prayer of pure, mature faith, the prayer of contemplation. We learn that silence is the language that God speaks best and most often.

Finally, we return to the Gospel and are told that Jesus sent away the people, and the disciples, so that he could be alone to pray. That is the first and most basic teaching on prayer from Jesus. He prayed. If Jesus, the Son of God, the creator of this universe, took time to pray, to enter into communion with his Father, to waste time just being with the Father and soaking up the Father's love, then so must we who profess to follow him. And our prayer, as much as possible, should try to be the prayer of contemplation, the prayer of both Elijah and Jesus, the prayer of finding God in the sheer silence of solitude. We need to create moments of silent solitude in our lives at times to enter into deeper experiences of being with our God.

Catherine von Dougherty, the Russian baroness who founded the Madonna House Apostolate in Combermere, Ontario, also known as the Marian Workers, was imbued with Byzantine spirituality. She wrote a book called *Poustinia*, in which she describes the practice of the Russian hermits who would fast on bread and water and pray for twenty-four hours in small huts. *Poustinia* is the Russian word for desert. They would symbolically enter into a desert or time of solitude this way. They would open themselves up to allow God to do within them whatever God wanted to do. This was truly the prayer of Elijah and Jesus, listening to God in the sheer silence. One person who follows this practice to this day does four things in his time of poustinia: he rests, prays, fasts and writes. There is no phone, no TV, no other reading material other than a bible and a commentary. It is a time of opening one's self up to listening to the voice of God speaking in the sheer silence. Could we consider doing that to a certain extent in our lives?

Coming back to the gospel, we are told that “those who were in the boat worshipped Jesus.” That was an amazing step forward for them, as Jewish men of that day, to worship Jesus, and the best response to the presence of Jesus.

Coming back to the gospel, we are told that “those who were in the boat worshipped Jesus.” That was an amazing step forward for them, as Jewish men of that day, to worship Jesus, and the best response to the presence of Jesus.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is our way of worshipping Jesus. It is another form of prayer, our greatest prayer as a church, a communal prayer. We gather to listen to God’s Word together, and celebrate his presence in both Word and sacrament.

Nourished, forgiven and healed, we are then missioned to go out to the world to spread the Good News of the reign of God. We do so daily strengthened by the voice of God coming to us in moments of solitude, of contemplative prayer that helps us to live out the Eucharist that we have celebrated together.