

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 8:23-34, RSV

To set the stage for this reading, let us recall that Jesus has preached his Sermon the Mount. Then he gives orders to go over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Before they set off, two people talk with him about following him. This is the occasion for his words about foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but he has nowhere to lay his head. Also, we have his words calling a certain man to entrust the burial of his father to others and to come follow him. Now, in this evening's reading, they set sail to the other side of the sea.

²³And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him.

²⁴And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. ²⁵And they went and woke him, saying, "Save, Lord; we are perishing."

²⁶And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. ²⁷And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

²⁸And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. ²⁹And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" ³⁰Now a herd of many swine was feeding at some distance from them. ³¹And the demons begged him, "If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of swine." ³²And he said to them, "Go." So they came out and went into the swine; and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and perished in the waters. ³³The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, and what had happened to the demoniacs. ³⁴And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighborhood.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This evening's reading invites us to linger with the faith of the Church that Jesus of Nazareth is fully God and fully man. That is the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon in the year 451 AD. It is as if the Church pondered the picture of Jesus in the Bible for four centuries, tried out various theories

describing Jesus, rejected some, accepted some, and finally reached the ecumenical consensus that Jesus is fully God and fully man. There are still mysteries here — mysteries that this Spirit-led Council left in place. We will understand them better by and by, as the hymn puts it:

By and by, when the morning comes,
When the saints of God are gathered home,
We will tell the story how we've overcome;
We will understand it better by and by.¹

The Council does ward off the idea that Jesus is sometimes God and sometimes man. The way the Council puts it is that Jesus is ...

...homoousios [of one being] with the Father in godhead,
and the same homoousios [of one being] with us in
manhood ... acknowledged in two natures without
confusion, without change, without division, without
separation.²

Jesus, then, is one person. He is never without either his divine nature or his human nature. There is no separation of the two natures in him.

And it does seem, from time to time, that we can see both natures at work in Jesus. This evening's story is a great example of that.

We see his human nature in his weariness, in his sleeping in the boat, in his needing a boat in the first place. And we see his mighty divine nature in his stilling of the storm on the sea and his casting out of the demons from the two men in the land of Gadarenes.

The reason I lift up our faith that Jesus is fully God and fully man is that I am fond of saying that the Gospel is that Jesus is risen from the dead. But it is not simply that a good man is risen from the dead. That would be splendid in itself. It is a great thing to believe that there is a good man alive in the world and that nothing can stop him and his goodness — not even death itself. But it is even a greater thing to believe that this Jesus who is risen from the dead is fully this good man *and* that he is also fully God — well capable of stilling a storm on the sea and the storm in the human heart.

For, those are the two storms that concern us — the storm on the sea and the storm in the human heart. Hurricane season approaches us. Scientists say that global warming might make it a bad season for us. The idea that we humans might well play a role in these fierce storms is a symbol of the large possibility that we have played a role in much of nature's chaos and misery,

¹ https://hymnary.org/text/trials_dark_on_every_hand

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Chalcedon

from the depletion of top soil and ground water to the extinction of various species on earth. St. Paul says that nature “groans,” wanting to be free from its bondage to decay, hoping for the liberation of the children of God (Romans 8:21-22). Today’s Bible story is great because it teaches us that things are not beyond repair. There is Someone who can repair them. Jesus of Nazareth can rebuke the storm on the sea, so that it leaps to obedience and gives immediate calm. It will be a marvel to see, by and by. The sooner, the better.

But perhaps even greater than the stilling the storm on the sea is the stilling of the storm in the human heart. Those demons in this evening’s reading spy Jesus and run for the hills. It is a foretaste of the New Jerusalem, where every sinful impulse will flee the human heart and run for the hills. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of this in a passage we cherish and read again every Reformation Sunday:

³¹“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³²not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”
(Jeremiah 31:31-34, RSV)

Then we are going to be able to get on with things. If we love human beings are at all, it has got to be thrilling to think of what a city we can build here in New York City when each one of us has a good and pure heart. What a town this will be when the holy law of God is within us, written upon our hearts, so that our every natural instinct will be toward the good and toward helping each other out.

We have marvels before us today in this passage from Matthew 8. We have hope for the healing of the earth and the healing of the heart, and we have the identity of the One who is going to make it so, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.