

## Commentary to the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

### Faith Matures in Moments of Crisis



### Introduction

Tensions, conflicts and misunderstandings have always accompanied the church-world relationships, but even more are highlighted with the coming of empiricism and rationalism that characterized the thinking of the XVII and XVIII centuries. The purely naturalistic view of the world and the unconditional trust in reason seemed to undermine the very foundations of the faith and the supernatural. The historical and archaeological research of the XIX century showed the apparent inconsistencies related to the traditional interpretation of the Bible.

Dictated by suspicions and fears, the response of the believers was not immediately serene. The movement of purification of ideas, language, and religious practices suffered delays, setbacks,

rethinking and involutions.

Today it is already possible to highlight the major changes stimulated by the secular challenges. They came up especially after the Second Vatican Council. From the study and meditation of the Word of God, finally in the hands of Christians, an image of God no longer imprisoned in the most archaic categories, a new face of man, a more evangelical church and the proposal of a society based on authentic values are emerging and delivered to the world, even in the midst of contradictions.

Something similar already happened in the days of the prophet Elijah, as the first reading will tell. Jesus asked his disciples a greater change of mentality as what will come out of the gospel passage. The path of conversion is not yet concluded. Not only in the signs of the times, but also through the severe criticism of non-believers, the Spirit invites Christians to project the sight, minds and hearts beyond the narrow horizons in which the fear of growing risks in keeping them prisoners.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

*"Even if I cross through a dark valley, I fear not, because you, Lord, are with me."*

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### **First reading: 1 Kings 19, 9.11-13**

We are in the first half of the ninth century BC when Omri, a skillful and resolute general, with an uprising takes power. The Book of Kings hastily remembers him—dedicating him only six verses (1 Kgs 16:23-28)—but the political, social and mainly religious upheavals which occurred during the eleven years of his reign have profoundly marked the history of Israel. He built a new capital on the mountain of Samaria, introduced new agricultural techniques, boosted trade, favored the culture, strengthened the army. In a short time he managed to make Israel a rich and powerful nation.

To consolidate alliances with neighboring kingdoms he resorted especially to matrimones. Of these, one had dramatic consequences: the one between Ahab's son and the intriguing, ambitious and charming but wicked Jezebel, the daughter of Eth-baal, king of Tyre.

It was the beginning of apostasy from the Lord because the bewitching foreign princess immediately claimed that Baal and Asherah, the divinities of her land, be worshipped in Israel. For them she had a magnificent temple built in Samaria, and imposed their cult as the official religion of the kingdom.

In this period of tension, "the prophet Elijah came like a fire; his words a burning torch" (Sir 48:1). He came from Gilead, the land beyond the Jordan, on the borders of the desert, "wore a mantle fur with a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kgs 1:8) and led an austere life. He quickly realized the "colonization" of the minds and consciences carried out by the Queen. He intervened to denounce the danger of religious and moral corruption. Despite his efforts and his courage, he was unable to convince the people to remain faithful to the Lord. At the height of desperation, one day he vent with his God: "The Israelites have forsaken your covenant. No one is left but myself, yet they still seek my life to take it away" (1 K 19:14).

It is at this point that our reading starts.

To escape Jezebel who wants to kill him, Elijah flees. He takes the way of the wilderness and goes to the mountain of God, Horeb, the Sinai, where four hundred years before, Moses spoke to the Lord. Reaching there, he enters a cave to spend the night. Behold, the Lord invites him to go out and to wait for a manifestation.

Here a great and so strong a wind broke out as to split the rocks. Then after the wind, there was an earthquake and a fire (vv. 11-12). These were—according to the prophet—the unmistakable signs of the passage of the Lord. In the midst of these impressive phenomena, in fact, God had always presented himself in the past to his faithful servants. He presented himself to Moses in the fire, between lightning and thunder and while the mountain shook to its foundation (Ex 19:16-19). Baal, the god of Jezebel, also appeared in the storm and hurricane. He rode the clouds, hurled the thunderbolts and hovered in the wind.

Elijah remained surprised that the Lord was not in the mighty wind, earthquake and fire.

“After the fire there was a murmur of gentle breeze” (v. 12). As Elijah heard it, he covered his face with his cloak. He understood that it was the moment in which the Lord passed. God revealed himself in a whole new way.

The translation of v. 12 should be corrected. The original Hebrew text does not speak of "light wind", but a voice of gentle silence heard by the prophet. It was in silence that Elijah captured the revelation of the Lord. It gave a leap forward in his journey of faith. The God in whom he had hitherto firmly believed kept the archaic traits of pagan deities. He was strong, tremendous, always ready to show his strength against the enemy. He was the one who on Mount Carmel confronted Baal and won (1 Kgs 18:20-24). Now Elijah understood: it was not the Lord who had prompted him to cut the throats of the prophets of Baal at the brook Kishon, but the false image he had of God.

In the "voice of gentle silence" he had come to discover the true face of his God. He realized that his "zeal for the Lord" was none other than fanaticism. He had realized that the conviction of "being left alone" to worship the Lord arose from dogmatism and intolerance. There were seven thousand men in Israel who had not bended the knees to Baal, but Elijah had not noticed (1 Kgs 19:18). "Come on!—says the Lord—take the road back" (1K 19:15), inwardly transformed by the “voice of gentle silence” that he has heard.

The spiritual experience of Elijah can be repeated by anyone who knows how to keep silence within oneself, by silencing the misleading voices that have inculcated a false image of God. In a calm reflection of the Bible and the Gospel, he lets himself be flooded by the true light, the light that shines on the face of Christ.

## **Second Reading: Romans 9:1-5**

The wise Ecclesiastes said: "For the wiser you are, the more worries you have" (Ecl 1:18). We might comment: the more one loves, the more pain there is. The thought of a son, a brother and a sister who

make foolish choices and those who ruin their lives deeply saddens us. They accompany us all the time as an obsession. The moments of joy are also shrouded with bitterness and melancholy.

We are not resigned to the fact that these loved ones let go of happiness that they could easily grasp. We love the church and we would like her as dreamed by her Spouse: pure as "the rose of Sharon, like a lily of the valleys" (Song 2:1). Instead we see her at times, hesitantly and less evangelically colluding or in oblivious connivance with the powers of this world.

What should one who suffers for love do? Nothing except to continue loving and waiting, with the patience of God, that the seed of the gospel accomplishes the miracle of the conversion of hearts.

The example of Paul is enlightening. He felt deeply the tragedy of the rejection of Christ by his people. He took so much to heart the salvation of Israel. He said, using a paradox, that he would willingly be excommunicated and cut off from Christ, if this would serve to recover his people (v. 3). His heartfelt words are reminiscent of Moses' intercession, "And now please forgive their sin... if not, blot me out of the book you have written" (Ex 32:32).

Paul could not understand that the chosen people, the children of Abraham, the heirs of the promises made to the patriarchs had rejected the Messiah of God (vv. 1-2).

When he writes to the Romans nearly thirty years have passed since the death and resurrection of Jesus. During this time he tried in every way to announce Christ to his Israelite brothers without getting any result, indeed, accentuating the opposition.

In the last two verses (vv. 5-6) the privileges that Israel has received from God are listed; the last, the most important of all, is the fact that Christ is son of this people.

Despite the present sadness, there is a thought that comforts the Apostle: the promises of God are irrevocable and if he has allowed the hardening of Israel, if he has "submitted all to disobedience, it is in order to show his mercy to all" (Rom 11:29-32).

It's the thought that must console whoever suffers for love: the story of every person, however, will end with salvation.

### **Gospel: Matthew 14:22-33**

"Get up and eat, for the journey is too long for you" the angel of the Lord said to Elijah fleeing into the wilderness. "The prophet stood up, ate and drank and on the force of that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God" (1 Kgs 19:7-8).

To this famous story of the gift of bread and water by the angel to Elijah, the revelation of the Lord narrated in the first reading followed.

In the Gospel passage, the scene is repeated. The disciples, nourished with the bread offered by Jesus (Mt 14:13-20), now receive the order to get moving, to get into the boat to the other side. Like Elijah, a

revelation of the Lord awaits them.

There are several strange details in this episode. It's not easy to find a reason for the order given by Jesus. Why does he let them go by themselves? Where must they go at this hour? Why doesn't he go with them? Why do it take them too long to cross the lake? I do not think it's because of the bad weather that he tranquilly goes up the mountain to pray and stay there until towards morning (v. 25). The claim of Peter to walk on the water is especially striking and—in the case of a proven swimmer—his fear of drowning (Jn 21:7).

These unique details make the exegete suspicious. They are an invitation to approach the passage with caution because it is not the story of a miracle, but a page of theology written with biblical images.

Some of these images are well known. The darkness of the night, first of all, is present, with its charge of negative meanings, in a number of Old Testament texts. Recall, for example, the psalmist who, on the night of his pain cries out to God without finding rest (Ps 22:3). It is with this darkness that the disciples are to confront themselves. When evening came, Jesus “forces them” (this is the verb used in the original text) to get into the boat and head to the “other side.” One gets the impression that they are reluctant and that they would like to stay next to the Master. However he, after having fed them with his bread, wants them to leave, to undertake the dangerous journey alone. The food he gave them is his word and his own person present in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Nourished by this dual bread, they have the necessary strength to accomplish the difficult crossing.

If Jesus was visibly present on the boat, the darkness would disappear; instead the darkness is thick.

When evening came (v. 13) indicates, in the symbolic language of the evangelist, the conclusion of Jesus' day. It is the end of his life. It is the moment in which he “climbs the mountain” alone, moves away from the crowds and definitely enters the world of God. This is why the disciples find themselves in the dark. Darkness is the image of disorientation, doubt that captures even the most convinced believer. At times, even one who is driven by a strong faith feels alone. He undergoes the harrowing experience of God's silence and wonders if his choices, his sacrifices, his commitment to the good have a sense.

Then there is the headwind. The Israelites have had the experience of the “mighty wind unleashed over the desert” that strikes and brings down the house (Job 1:19). They know the “east wind that shatters the ships” (Ps 48:8) and the “tempestuous wind” which whips up the waves, shakes ships plunging them to the depths, reeling like drunkards, in spite of all their seamanship (Ps 107:26-27).

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians employs this image to describe the senseless reasoning of people, the mentality of this world opposite to that of Christ. To the Christians of his communities Paul recalls: “Then no longer shall we be like children tossed about by any wave or wind of doctrine and deceived by the cunning of people” (Eph 4:14).

The waters were in the Old Testament images to describe the forces that lead to death. The psalmist, afflicted by a serious illness that is leading him to the grave, cries out to the Lord: “From above, reach down and draw me out of the deep waters” (Ps 144:7); another, having been healed, says: “A deadly flood surrounded me, devilish torrents rushed at me...Reaching down from above, he drew me out of

the deep waters” (Ps 18:5.17). The Lord promises to his people: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, the rivers will not sweep over you” (Is 43:2).

The Israelites were always afraid of waters. Only the Lord—they said—is not afraid of whirlwinds and storms. He who, by his word, separated the "waters below and the waters above it” (Gen 1:7). He alone can hush the billows to silent waves (Ps 107:25-30 ); and he is the only one who "treads on the waves of the sea" (Job 9:8).

If one keeps in mind this symbolism, he understands the fear of the disciples. They fear of being overwhelmed by the forces of evil and death. They are in the dark and do not perceive the Master next to them. A dramatic situation, but inevitable, and they have to face it.

The boat was tossed about by the waves. The original text uses here the Greek verb *basanizo* which properly means to put to the test. The *basanos* was the hard stone used in Lydia order to verify, through a violent friction, if a metal was valuable or worthless.

The waves torment, almost torture the disciples, but they are the necessary tests they have to undergo if they want to get out of it mature.

Towards the end of the night there appears Jesus, walking on the waves of the sea, as only God was capable of doing (Job 9:8). The disciples do not recognize him. They believe of having something to do with a ghost. Their reaction is really strange. What happen? Why don't they recognize him?

We are not confronting a factual written account but a page of theology. Matthew is describing, with the biblical language, the situation of the Christian communities of his time. They were "tormented" by many trials, distressed by doubts and above all disoriented by the fact of not having the Master visibly with them, who would have infused safety and courage in them.

The evangelist wants to enlighten them. Jesus is always close to his disciples, even the end of the world, as he has promised (Mt 28:20), but not physically, as when he walked the roads of Palestine. He is present in a different way, as a ghost. This is the pale image used in the Gospels to describe the Risen Lord and his new condition of life. When, on the day of Easter, he appears in the midst of the disciples gathered together, “in their panic and fright, they thought they were seeing a ghost” (Lk 24:37).

It's not easy to be aware of his presence. He becomes recognizable only with the eyes of faith.

The second part of the passage (vv. 28-33) contains the dialogue between Jesus and Peter. It starts with the request of the Apostle: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (v. 28). His question is odd, but only for one who take it in a literal sense. If it is understood in the symbolic context of the whole story, then the meaning immediately comes out clear. Peter, the first of the disciples, beholds the Master—The Risen One—who crossed the waters of death, now walking on the sea, is in God's world. Peter knows he is called to follow him in the gift of life, but death scares him. He fears of not succeeding and asks the Lord to give him strength.

As long as he keeps his eyes fixed on the Master, he is able to go to him. When his faith diminishes,

when he begins to doubt the choice he made, he sinks and is afraid of being overwhelmed, of losing his life.

It is the description of our condition. "Come to me now—the Risen Lord repeats to every disciple. Do not be afraid of losing your life. If you hesitate, death will make you afraid. If you trust my word, the waters of death will not scare you, and you will cross over and catch up with me in the resurrection."

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