

The Inclusive Community

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 21, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Father's Day

Trust

Mark 4:35-41

All life seeks safety.

A dog heading home, a wolf seeking a pack, a wren finding a house, an eagle building a nest, a chipmunk running for a crevice. All life seeks safety.

A baby in a mother's arms, a child holding a father's hand, a bride and groom, a sailor in a harbor, an adult needing a place to sleep, a person inviting us to a dinner where we are free from hunger and harm.

Without safety, we are lost. Literally.

Safety works as long as we are willing to risk, often something, sometimes, everything. If we become too safe, we atrophy; if we become too daring, we drift into frenzy.

And so the baby and the sailor, the eagle and the wren must be open to loss before being safe makes sense.

In today's Gospel, we have loss and safety in equal measure. The Sea of Galilee, even today, is subject to swift changes in wind and waves.

Let us catch the scene Mark gives us. It has been a long day. It is dark. Even the sun seems to have gone for safety somewhere else. Jesus suggests as they get into the boat that they might head for the eastern shore of Galilee, away from the crowds, although a flotilla of boats follows them. Their boat is suddenly turned and twisted, almost capsized and rotated. The apostles are skilled fishermen; they know the sea; they do not panic readily. They panic now.

All the risk of life is symbolized by the turbulence on the sea. The storm comes out of nowhere and seizes the boat, shaking it violently.

Jesus is a carpenter, not a sailor. He would be less helpful than the apostles. Mark says he slept through the hurricane of chaos and riot. He could not, of course, sleep through that. But the point of the story is not the accuracy of the details but the message in the emotions of the apostles. They tell him: “We are about to drown. We cannot manage the boat. It is out of our hands.”

His response is to stand against the waves, to face the danger and end it, to bring them peace as the storm is calmed.

We must not keep our attention on the storm but on the passengers. Jesus tells them: “You are never lost. That is not something you see with your eyes. That is something you believe. What do you believe? How far does your faith go?”

In semitic literature and in the ancient world, the sea was the symbol of chaos and evil. Its monsters were not visible until they emerged out of nowhere and attacked. The surface of the sea was unpredictable; a tsunami or a tidal wave gave no warning. On the sea, safety was hard to find. There was no home to run to, no tree to hide in, no cave for shelter.

All one had was a pathetically small boat.

In Genesis, God addresses the chaos and makes creation from it, speaks to the waters and the darkness and brings order and safety from them. God in Genesis is revealed as the great harbor, the source of tranquility, the home and nest where all life is safe. God in Genesis is the mother’s arms and the father’s hand, the place where sleep is safe and bread can be broken in security.

Jesus is revealed in Mark’s Gospel passage as the God of Genesis who brings, not so much a message or a miracle, but something more. Jesus brings life, rescues life, will not let it be lost, offers peace and makes us calm.

The Church has no business or mandate to make God scary or an enemy, the harsh exploiter of our fears, the storm on the sea of our life rather than the gentle waves of safety. The Church is often like the irresponsible mother who threatens her children with their father’s presence and punishment when she cannot manage or control them. Fathers’ Day for some church leaders is not a father’s hand but a father’s fist. This message about God is as twisted as the boat on Galilee which seems to be a target of the storm. Jesus is the opposite of the storm, the one who ends it, not the inciter but the terminator of the storm.

Sometimes God and spirituality are presented as though the Church is rooting for the storm because the disciples are terrified and deserve to be, are near being lost which is supposed to happen to most people because of their sins or wrong religion (most people in the world would be in the wrong religion) or because they seem to be too happy or because they have their gender wrong or their sexuality, because their marriage is unravelling or they feel worthless.

So, today's Gospel passage is about trust. Whom do you trust when all seems lost? Think about that. Who is home for you? Where is your harbor? Whose arms, whose hands, whose table brings you peace?

Mark tells us the disciples found safety in Jesus when all the other ways of staying afloat were not working. Sooner or later in all our lives, none of the systems works anymore and those we trust most cannot settle our fears or secure our future. The New Testament says that is why God is there. God is not in the storm but in the calm, not in the wind but in the whisper, not in the turbulence but in the tranquility.

Jesus, in Mark, does what God is supposed to do. Jesus stops the chaos and shows the disciples that God is the mother's arms and the father's hand. Jesus was asleep in the boat because he believed this. He could not be lost. He could not lose.

We have faith when you and I believe this. Not a creed. Why would God care about that. No creed makes us feel safe. God is the one who simply will not let us perish! We either believe that or we spend all our lives terrified. God is not a terrorist. God is a liberator and a lover. Believe in that and you will have heard the Gospel passage today and understood it, maybe for the first time, as not only good news but the best news possible.