

19th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Cycle A

August 7, 2011

Saint Margaret Parish, Bel Air

Amazing Grace

One of our classic Christian hymns is *Amazing Grace*.

We all know those opening lines: "*Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!*" We sing of God's grace saving us.

In years past, we used the word *grace* much more frequently than we do today. Today we still believe in this reality, but we often use other words for it.

Today, we often speak of the presence, the love, the strength, or the healing action of God. These words help to express the reality of what God does for us or who God is for us.

And, of course, in all of this, God is giving himself to us. God's action is freely given, gratuitous, gratis, and from this we get the word *grace*.

God Reaches Out

I see today's gospel as a story about the grace of God.

Jesus reaches out and extends his hand to Peter. Peter is afraid because of the wind and waves on the lake.

The whole point is that Jesus is here for us when we have to deal with the wind and the waves of life. God gratuitously reaches out to us.

God gives us his presence when we are afraid or anxious. God gives us his love when we feel abandoned or alone.

God gives us his strength when we find life difficult or burdensome. And God gives us his healing when we are spiritually injured or even physically ill.

We Respond

So, God reaches out to us and this we call *grace*.

But, like Peter, we need to allow Jesus to take hold of us. We need to allow him to be present, to love, to strengthen and to heal us.

And to do this, we need to keep our eyes fixed on God. Peter becomes afraid and gets in trouble when he takes his eyes off of Jesus.

He starts to sink when he just focuses on the wind and the waves. The same thing can happen to us.

There will be wind and waves in our lives too – a personal sickness, the death of a loved one, financial troubles, and on it can go. We all experience the wind and the waves.

And in these times, if we keep our eyes focused just on the troubles, we may get overwhelmed and start sinking like Peter. The key is to keep our eyes fixed on the Lord.

Looking at Jesus

How are we to do this?

My experience tells me that if we are going to keep our eyes on Jesus in the storms of life, we need a pattern for doing this every day, even when life is calm. I recommend three habits or practices for doing this.

First, I recommend that every morning we offer a prayer to center ourselves on the Lord. We can thank God just for the gift of a new day of life.

We can ask the Lord for strength and guidance in what we have to do in this new day. This kind of brief morning prayer, when our personal weather is calm or stormy, helps us to develop a pattern of keeping our eyes fixed on the Lord.

Second, I recommend that we choose a one-sentence prayer or verse and repeat it often during the course of the day. For example, *“I am with you always,”* or *“God is love,”* or *“Lord, you are my refuge and my strength.”*

A one-sentence prayer like these helps us to stay centered on the Lord throughout the day. It helps us to keep our eyes on the Lord when our personal weather is calm or stormy.

And third, I recommend that we appreciate the sacraments for what they are. The prophet Elijah, in our first reading, experiences God reaching out to him in the ordinary way of a whisper.

So God reaches out to us in the ordinary bread and wine of the Eucharist, in the absolution of Reconciliation, in the oil of the Anointing of the Sick. Our positive participation in the sacraments helps us to keep our eyes fixed on the Lord when our personal weather is calm or stormy.

Conclusion

When we respond to God in these ways, then we are allowing God to take hold of us and be the steady help for us that he wants to be.

And that is *Amazing Grace*.