

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

After I came to this country, I realized that I was taking a long time to do my shopping. I would spend an hour in a store, and still there would not be any items in my cart. The reason? Too many choices! In India, milk means there is only one thing and nothing more. Here if you go to get milk, there is 3%, 2%, 1%, fat-free, lactose-free, almond milk, soy milk, cashew milk, chocolate milk, coconut milk, etc. So I had to read all the labels to find what I wanted. Here you go to buy bread, and there are a couple dozen varieties of bread. But where I grew up, bread is bread—just one thing and nothing more. So I had a problem of choice. In the gospel of today, the disciples had a choice—either to stay with Jesus or to go away. Peter spoke for all of them when he said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

There were many who followed Jesus. But they discontinued and went away after Jesus’ teaching on the bread of life. Just the 12 decided to stick with Jesus. The teaching of Jesus was the same, but the reactions of the listeners were different. One group found Jesus’ teaching hard and parted company with him. But the other group meets the challenge successfully and remains faithful to Jesus. There are times when our faith in Christ is challenged. There are times in life when we are “pushed to the wall.” There are times in life when we are ready to quit. When the disciples’ faith in Jesus was challenged by Jesus’ teaching on giving his body to eat, they decided to stick with him. When pushed to the wall, they kept their eyes firmly fixed on Jesus. They fell back on their personal faith in Jesus, whereas the other group fixed their attention on the problem. If they had stuck with Jesus till the end, they would have found the marvelous resolution to their problem. Fixing the attention on the problem—or fixing the attention on the person of Christ made all the difference.

There is another incident in the gospel of Mathew (14:26-31) that involves Peter. The disciples of Jesus were caught in a storm in the middle of the lake, and they were afraid they were not going to make it out alive. And at that same time, Jesus came walking on the water toward them. They were terrified and thought that Jesus was a ghost. But Jesus said, “It is I. Do not be afraid.” Then Peter said, “Lord, if it is really you, allow me to come to you walking on the water.” Jesus said, “Come.” Then Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he became conscious of the wind and the waves, he began to sink. Peter was fine so long as he was focused on Christ. But when he let the problems that surrounded him become his focus, he indeed began to sink.

There are times in life when storms try to destroy us. Let us not fix our attention on our problems but, rather, on Jesus standing in the boat and encouraging us. There are times when our faith will be challenged like that of the disciples’. We may even be tempted to part our company with Jesus, and walk away from him. These are times when we have to fix our attention, not on the problem, but on the person of Jesus Christ. There are times when we have to say, “Lord, to whom we shall go? You have the words of eternal life.” Let me conclude with a few lines from a poem written by a British Poet, Rudyard Kipling.

If you can meet with triumph and disaster
And treat those imposters the same
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools
Or watch the things you gave your life to, destroyed
And stoop to build them up with worn-out tools
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says hold on
Yours is the Earth and everything that is in it.