

19TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – 2005
“...a tiny whispering sound.”

Sooner or later, a person of faith will ask the question, “*What does God want of me?*” If we believe in God, and above all a God who entered into our lives as a human being, we can’t help but wonder what he expects of us. That is normal. But there is another question that we need to ask first. What do we expect of God? The reason I raise this question is because of the first reading about Elijah. He was told to go stand at the entrance of a cave and wait for the Lord to pass by. Then all sorts of amazing things happened. The wind blew, the earth quaked and fire blazed. Now, if I were Elijah, I would have bowed profoundly to the wind, pleaded for mercy during the earthquake, and run in fear from the fire. After all, don’t we look for God in the extraordinary events of life? We look for the miraculous to find evidence of God. We so long to see something of the divine we see images of God in cinnamon rolls and images of Mary in window pains.

But God wasn’t present in the wind, earthquake or fire. It was to a tiny whispering sound that Elijah hid his face in reverence, and then stepped forward to meet his God. We expect to find God in extraordinary things, things that rouse our emotions and appeal to our imagination. We look for God in the mysterious, the other worldly and transcendent. (To some, the divine is much more present in Latin than in English.) And God may be found there, in all of these things, but not necessarily. In Jesus, God entered our lives as a human being. He let go of his divine trappings and became one of us. He became like us in all things, but sin. While we are drawn to the unusual, the miraculous, even the theatrical at times, Jesus speaks to us in tiny whispering sounds. We know his words, they are so simple.

“This is my body, take and eat.”

“This is the cup of my blood, take and drink.”

“Your sins are forgiven, go in peace.”

When we first hear these words, they captivate us. They move us. They are almost enchanted. We are in awe at their meaning and at what God does for us through them. But they are so ordinary, so plain. And if we're not careful we may start looking for something else to captivate our imagination.

Not long ago, a young woman called to see if I could celebrate her wedding. I said I'd love to. Then she added that it would not be in the church but in a secular setting. Her fiancé, after all, had reservations about Catholics so the wedding in the church was not possible. *“Besides,”* she added, *“I'm looking into becoming a Christian.”* I'd given this young woman her first Holy Communion, and now she wanted to become Christian? Some fundamentalists had gotten to her head. If she wanted intimacy with Jesus, what could be more intimate than receiving him in Eucharist or hearing him say, *“Your sins are forgiven”* in the sacrament of reconciliation? But those words are so ordinary sounding. She must have been looking for something or someone who could make her feel the wind of the spirit, the shaking of her soul and heat from the fire of faith. But Jesus speaks to us in tiny whispering sounds instead.

Mind you, there is no reason that our liturgies need to be dull and boring. While we are not here to be entertained, there is nothing that says we can't be inspired, consoled and encouraged. That's up to us, and the spirit that we bring, our readiness to enter into the prayers, join the singing and unite our hearts in the wonder of the mysteries we celebrate.

Of course, some people leave us because they are attracted to something that is incompatible with the church teaching. Maybe they want to play marriage by living with their boyfriend or girlfriend. That is so sad. They think it will prepare them for being married. Why don't they play driving a car without a license, or play airplane pilot, or play surgeon? But they object, "*That would be stupid because it could hurt people.*" And what makes you think playing marriage doesn't hurt people?

Others leave the church because they don't want to be bothered. There are other things they'd rather do with their time. I recall the Old Testament story of how Esau forfeited his inheritance to his brother Jacob for a bowl of soup. A bowl of soup! Human nature hasn't changed. Some forfeit their divine inheritance for nothing. Granted, some leave the Catholic Church to join other churches, but almost never do they come talk to me about it. Why do you suppose that is?

Of course, some people leave the church because the church has let them down. Sometimes it is very personal, like what a priest said or did that they didn't like. Sometimes, it is much bigger than that. How can God be with the church when its priests abuse children? When bishops know it and then reassign them to abuse in new parishes? I just learned of a couple who have left the church because of the priest abuse scandal. I think today's gospel has something to say to us.

The boat in the story is a traditional symbol of the church. And it is being tossed about by the wind and the waves. The disciples are terrified. "*What if we go down?*" they must have yelled. And then Jesus comes to them walking on the water. "*It is a ghost,*" they now yell. And Jesus says, "*Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.*" Now, that's easier said than done. So Peter, representing all the disciples, challenges the voice, "*Lord, if it is*

you, command me to walk on the water.” In other words, *“Let me do something extraordinary!”* So Jesus says, *“Come!”* But Peter’s lack of faith, expressed in his fear, lets him down, so to speak. He sinks. So Jesus reaches out and takes Peter’s shaking hand. It’s over.

Today, the church is still tossed by violent storms. We wonder if God cares. We fear. If it means abandonment to survive, some are ready to jump. But Jesus reassures us that he has not abandoned us, even in these difficult times. *“Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.”* It is like Jesus is saying, *“I don’t expect you to walk on water. Rather, I expect you to believe. I expect you to be faithful. That will be enough. In a few moments you will hear me say through your priest, ‘This is my body, take and eat. This is the cup of my blood, take and drink.’ I’m not going to yell it. I am going to say it softly, in a tiny whispering sound. Don’t forget. People have longed to hear what you hear!”*