

19th Sunday (A)

- Today's Gospel takes us to the very heart of our Christian faith.
- How often we find ourselves in situations when we're unable to cope; everything around us is crashing in on us & we feel we're being overwhelmed – it may well be happening for you now during the COVID pandemic.
- We can be anxious & afraid & when we pray, God seems to be far away & there is no answer.
- That is the situation of the apostles in the boat out on the lake.
- Matthew presents this portrait for his community which was in a similar situation.
- This Gospel resonates with that experience, & it resonates with lots of experiences in our lives.
- Have you ever felt swamped by an event - a traumatic accident, the death of someone we love, betrayal by a friend, the loss of a job, failure in an exam, financial insecurity - which seems to leave us floundering?
- A sudden tempest storms into our life & we can't find our feet, can be quite literally gasping for air, we can feel we are drowning.
- Those are the times when we **can** cry out in our individual distress 'Lord, save me' & Jesus will extend his hand, pull us from the turbulent water, get into the boat of life with us & calm the storm.
- **But**, & this is very important, God does not take us back, as if by magic, to the previous situation; the storm might be behind us, but we have to press on.
- The disciples had started off from the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee, familiar territory - Jesus guided them through the stormy situation to "the other side", the pagan side, unfamiliar territory where they would not have felt at home.
- It takes courage for us too to move to a new situation, but with Jesus' presence we need not be as afraid as we would otherwise be.
- People often talk about & await the time when things go back to 'normal', but what we need to appreciate is that the 'normal' we once knew & lived in will never be again.
- The question is what we do now to construct a new way of living, both for ourselves & in our relationships into the future.
- What are you learning during this time? What have you lost, & more importantly, what can you gain to take into the future as a better way of living?
- But this Gospel is not so much about individuals as it is about the Church.
- It is about the disciples of Jesus around the figure of Peter.
- We are the disciples of Jesus gathered in the boat with the successor of St Peter, Pope Francis.
- When the Church is buffeted by storms, it is often because the Church is in the midst of a journey from familiar to unfamiliar territory.
- People in our own time experience this: people, especially the young, are afraid of being ridiculed by their peers; others, as a result of the conflicts, struggles &

scandals within the church, some are in a panic, others resentful, others have become narrow-minded & defensive & yet others have just become indifferent & fallen away from the church & more increasingly today, in the face of the scandals of the Church & after the time of the Royal Commission & the trials of George Pell, people are being challenged for their belonging to the Catholic Church, or sending their kids to a Catholic school.

- We can all list some of the storms of the past fifty years.
- There is a new attitude to authority.
- Rule by dictate or decree with unreflecting obedience is not possible except in a few remaining authoritarian or totalitarian regimes.
- Rome-based clerics & bishops have to get used to this new situation as well, & Jesus says to them 'keep rowing' to the unfamiliar shore.
- There is a new attitude to gender roles.
- The feminist movement has challenged many of the stereotypes by which women had been subjugated over the centuries.
- Males have got to get used to this new situation & Jesus says to us 'keep rowing' to the unfamiliar shore.
- Pope Francis is rowing in the right direction on that score.
- As he has said: *'The challenge today is this, to think about the specific place of women also in those places where the authority of the Church is exercised for various areas of the Church.'* [A Big Heart Open to God, America: National Catholic Review 30/9/13]
- There is a new attitude people have to priests & bishops; there is anger & suspicion at sexual abuse & its cover up.
- Transparency & responsibility are demanded.
- Clergy & all of us have to get used to this new situation.
- Jesus says 'keep rowing' to an unfamiliar shore.
- Of course, throwing tradition overboard willy nilly is not a solution either.
- There is Tradition with a capital 'T' which is the Spirit-led experience of Catholic Christianity over two millennia. That is not to be jettisoned.
- But the grace of discernment is needed.
- In particular, Jesus will not allow us the indulgence of nostalgic yearning for the safety of the past country inhabited by the Church.
- We must make our way to the other shore - perhaps we are called to help build a new structure of the Church on that other shore.
- We know the preferred model put forward by the current successor of St Peter, Pope Francis: 'I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. ... **Heal the wounds.** ... And you have to start from the ground up.'
- How can we be a healing Church for those who currently suffer?
- We can row with courage because we know we are in the same boat as Peter to whom Jesus constantly extends a saving hand & says: "Do not be afraid."