

**Homily for a Parish Visit to
Holy Trinity Parish, Stonington
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A**

August 10, 2014

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

As Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, it is a privilege for me to celebrate and preach at this Mass with you today. Usually when a bishop comes to a parish, it is a special occasion, like administering the Sacrament of Confirmation or celebrating a parish jubilee. I am not here for any of those reasons today. I am here for a regular Sunday Mass because I want at some time to visit every parish in our diocese, in order to get to know the people and the places that make up our Catholic community in central Illinois.

What does a bishop look for when he comes to a parish? Well, I didn't come to see if the floors were cleaned and the pews were polished! Though I must say, your church looks very nice! I take my cue from the Gospel passage where Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

First and foremost, when a bishop comes to a parish, he looks for the presence of the Catholic **faith**, to see whether it is strong and vibrant, whether it is growing, and if the conditions are present for its continued growth in the future. So it is good to see people of faith gathered here.

At the same time, a pastoral visit is not just a time for a bishop to see the parish, but also for the parish to see the bishop. The Church is all about relationships. As the three persons of the Trinity are an intimate communion of Father, Son and Spirit in relationship to each other, the Church exists as a communion in relationship to God and in relation to each other, the People of God, the Body of Christ. As a bishop, I have a special relationship with you, and you have a special relationship with me, and one of my roles is to bridge the relationship between you and the Pope and the rest of the universal Church, so that we may all be one in Christ's Body, into which we have been incorporated by the grace of Baptism.

Today's Bible readings all deal with the question of humanity's search for and encounter with divinity. Yet, in the experience of the people of God, that search is turned on its head. As today's scriptures show us, it is not that we humans are able to seek and find God by our own powers,

but rather it is God who allows Himself to be discovered by us. Moreover, we often encounter God in the most unexpected of places and ways.

In the first reading, Elijah is on the run, in fear of his life, being hunted down by the pagan queen Jezebel. Elijah has had enough and pleads with God to take his life. But on Mount Horeb, the same mountain where God had spoken to Moses, Elijah is given the rare privilege of having an encounter with the Lord, who is found not amidst the most noticeable events or remarkable occurrences as one might expect - a mighty wind, an earthquake, a fire - but in the gentle breeze, sometimes translated as a "still, small voice" or even "the silence." It is there that Elijah encounters the living God.

In the Gospel the disciples are battling with the storm on the lake, in circumstances that make any encounter with God highly improbable. However, the Lord does indeed appear to them - though his disciples think he is a ghost. Jesus reassures them: "Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid." This is the same message that the risen Christ gives to his apostles when he appears to them in the upper room: "Do not be afraid," and "Peace be with you."

But the Gospel also teaches us about ourselves. The symbolism of the event reminds us that we are, in this life, in danger from the storms of this world. Personal sin, illness, bereavement and persecution can all cause storms in our lives. Temptations against living a life of faith can be frequent and strong.

When Peter attempts to leave the boat and go to Christ on his own, he begins to sink. Perhaps the reason Peter began to sink so quickly is that he never should have attempted to walk on the water in the first place! Peter cannot do what God can do. Notice what does Jesus does: He puts Peter back in the boat! Peter is often impetuous in the Gospels, and here his desire to go to Christ on his own gets him into trouble. He is saved by being brought back to the boat; and the ship can be seen as representing the Church. Too often, people want to leave the boat, the barque of Peter, the Church, and go straight to Jesus on their own. We are, of course, saved by God, but we are saved as members, so to speak, of a crew.

This image of the Church as a ship is very ancient. In the Old Testament, the whole of creation is saved by taking refuge in Noah's ark. In the New Testament, Jesus is seen preaching from Peter's boat, saving it from storms and commanding that it be steered "to the other side," or be

“put out into the deep.” By putting Peter back in the boat, Jesus is showing us that even the prince of the apostles is saved by remaining in the ship of the Church. Ancient authors also liked to note that ships in those days were made of wood with metal nails, and so drew a parallel with the cross. The mainmast of a ship with its crosspiece also has the shape of a cross. By staying in the ship we also cling to the cross.

Throughout the centuries, many people have felt that they can get to God better on their own, rather than being kept back by the sometimes troublesome group that is the Church. Perhaps we feel this too, especially when the Church is racked by scandal or division. But it is especially when the storms are raging that we are called to stay in the ship of the Church. Notice also how today’s Gospel passage ends: those in the boat, in other words, those who are in the Church, recognize Jesus as the Son of God.

In our lives, we can find ourselves like Elijah and Peter – at the end of our tether, living in fear, full of doubts, perhaps simply wishing it would all just end. Like Elijah, we can discover that we don’t find God where we expect to meet Him. Or, like Peter, the storms of our life may mean that we are so busy struggling simply to survive that we are unable to lift up our eyes to recognize the God who is already walking towards us in the midst

of our personal battles. God comes to us where the world does not expect, here in this church, in the bread and wine that will become His Body and Blood in this Eucharist.

May our gathering around this altar and our reception of the Eucharist strengthen us to live the demands of the Gospel and always fill us with an awareness of the grace and peace that comes to us from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

May God give us this grace. Amen.