

Trinity 9

Last week I ended with some fake news, promising The Calming of the Storm. Today's Gospel was not the one generally entitled The Calming of the Storm, but we did hear *a* calming of *a* storm, the second of the sea-miracles, a more personal story involving the group of disciples in general and Peter in particular. I had mentally replaced one piece of the Gospel jigsaw with one of a similar shape. That is very much how the gospels work: human story-telling taking events and *placing* them to illustrate the truth they demonstrate. Stories, like humankind, are made in the image of God.

As I said last week, at the heart of the gospels we hear about Jesus' teaching ministry, though always with an eye to his Passion and Resurrection. This core is made up of parables, and miracles which are parables, plus a couple of sermons which are expanded into formal discourses by John, interwoven with the parables and miracles.

We are now in the midst of three Sundays focusing on these Miracles, or as John more accurately describes them, Signs, which are enacted parables. Their point is what is *signified*. Last week we heard the feeding of the five thousand, which is followed by the feeding of the four thousand, events which point us to God's gathering-in and feeding both Jews and gentiles with the bread of his word, enacted for us daily at the altar in the Mass.

Today we've heard the strange story of Jesus sending his friends out in a boat in a storm while himself withdrawing for quiet prayer: this withdrawal precedes a significant re-entry. The disciples are frightened both by the storm and, as we've just heard, by him walking towards them across the sea. He responds, 'do not be afraid, it is I', 'do not to be afraid' being the single most frequent *divine* command in scripture. Then impulsive Peter tries to meet him on the waves, sets out, begins to sink and is rescued.

As with last week's miracle or sign scriptural context abounds: briefly, the waters of chaos being calmed by the Spirit at creation; our rescue, in the person of Noah, from the great Flood; the deep history of Israel's God as one who rides upon the storm and can make his way on the waters; and Passover, the parting of the Red Sea. The theme is found in creation narrative, repeated in psalms and canticles, enacted in the Exodus. The people of God, tossed about on the storms of life, are rescued by the one who redeems us, saves us; we are recalled to faith, to trust the promise that though we fail and sink, we are pulled back to safety by our loving God. The underlying scripture proclaims that only God can master this terrifying element, telling us who Jesus is. Today's gospel is a disclosure of the same type as the Transfiguration. Peter's experience is ours, a reassurance that Christ is always at hand for each of us as well as for the Church as a whole. As suggested last week, there is more detail in Fr Jeffrey John's book *The Meaning in the Miracles*.

Last week in setting the scene for the miracles, I mentioned the Jewish teaching method, *Haggadah*, 'narrative' in which scriptural texts are used to interpret what is reported, weaving together threads of prophecy-fulfilment, symbolism, typology, allegory and numerology. The reported event reapplies the truths, hopes, patterns and meanings of the scriptural past to the present, and the key to unlocking the meaning is found in the Old Testament stories underlying the telling.

This way of communicating narrative is innately human. Knowing it from fiction or the telling of myths helps us to understand what the scriptural writers are doing: this is human communication, with the truth-stakes raised.

Compare, at the most basic level, films of books and remakes of films. In a more nuanced way some directors reuse or recreate scenes and images from other films; some call this intertextuality; that just means one text using another text to tell a story. Fr Richard Leonard SJ writes that this is characteristic of animated films like *Shrek*, which set me thinking about how many sophisticated references and re-tellings were present in the animated cartoons of my youth, from Bugs Bunny to Duckula. That led me in turn to my favourite director, Federico Fellini. Fellini, whose working life began as a cartoonist, constructed his films from a series of characters which he drew; there was no fixed script (that's a parable of creation). As he found his voice, his films became interlocking scenes worked up from these images, weaving together elements from his remembered past. All are beautiful, funny and human. Having just watched again his most personal film, *Amarcord*, (Riminese dialect for 'I remember'), I was struck by a comment by one of his producers, Renzo Rossellini: 'all Fellini's films are *frescoes*'. For an Italian, growing up with that sort of art all around him, this does not mean just frescoes in the technical sense. He means visual narratives in fragmentary episodes, carefully arranged to help us interpret them. An orthodox iconostasis, medieval wall paintings and, nearer to hand, the images all around us on these walls and in our stained-glass windows, all do this, they tell us the Gospel.

Rossellini compares the famous frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, where Michelangelo, asked by Pope Julius to paint a geometrically ornamented ceiling with the twelve apostles around the decoration, instead painted Old Testament scenes, organizing the composition so that the narrative begins at the altar with the story of *The Creation of the Heavens and Earth*, followed by *The Creation of Adam and Eve* and the *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*. And, note for today, *Noah and the Great Flood*. The figures around these frescoes are accompanied by prophets and sibyls who foretold the coming of Christ. In the four corners of the room are scenes depicting the Salvation of Israel.

As with religious art, not every Fellini film is as effective in communication as every other, but within the completeness of his work each film is an episode with individual scenes. Fellini himself said:

All my films turn upon this idea ... a world without love, characters full of selfishness, people exploiting one other, and in the midst of it all, there is always ... a little creature who wants to give love and who lives for love.

That is a profoundly Catholic sensibility, almost echoing S Therese of Lisieux.

Many of Fellini's films have inspired films, or scenes in films, by other directors, acknowledging the power and truth of his stories, their human resonance. The incarnation enfleshes religious story telling as the most *human* story telling. The Gospel is the story of how God, to show his love for us, achieves human resonance, makes his Word heard in our words. Those frescoes, and what you see depicted all around you in this building, are gospels. The miracles or signs are scenes which communicate truth if we don't get stuck on the surface of them.

We don't need to be fearful that this somehow undermines the truth of the Gospel. This resonance with our lives makes it our story: we are pulled from the waves when we fall or fail. That is why the gospels are the Gospel, capital G, the primary Christian scripture. They are narratives, not propositions, statements or laws. Jesus didn't die for a proposition. He entered into our life, including our death, so that we could become fully human, alive in the image of God.