

About today's Mass readings, NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading: 1Kings 19:9, 11-13

This awesome story of Elijah's encounter with the Lord is read today to pair with Peter's encounter with Jesus, the Son of God, on Lake Galilee. Mount Horeb, where it occurred, is an awesome place, a rocky mountain on Sinai. No earth, vegetation, or animals, just stark rock, some iron-ore red, some granite-grey, some almost sulphur-green. It was here that Moses and the People of Israel are said to have had their experience of God, too, and the silent mountains almost speak of God. Elijah was fleeing from the threat of persecution, a trek of 'forty days and forty nights' – biblical shorthand for 'a long time'. There are experiences which cannot be put into words, whether it is the ecstasy of love or music or beauty or art. No one can adequately express in words the experience of an encounter with God, and Elijah's is described quite differently from that of Moses, who experienced God in thunder, lightning and earthquake. The 'light, murmuring sound' is literally 'a sound of silence'. In any case the experience strengthened him enough to return to his mission. It is because of these encounters that Moses and Elijah are present at the Transfiguration, when the closest disciples experience the divinity of Jesus on the holy mountain, the feast celebrated by the Church last Thursday.

Second Reading: Romans 9:1-5

After his exposition of Christ's saving work St Paul turns to the question which tortures him: how is it that Israel, so long prepared, failed to recognize the fulfilment of the prophecies. Paul was a Jew through and through and was deeply wounded by the failure of his own people to welcome Jesus, despite all the privileges given them which he here details. For Paul Christianity is the conclusion to which Judaism was meant to lead. But God never revokes his gifts, and these gifts still belong to the Jews; it can never be said that the Jews have been superseded and lost their status as God's chosen people. For the next two chapters Paul quotes every conceivable scripture to show that the rebellions of the Jews against God throughout their history made it inevitable that they would fail to recognize the Messiah. Nevertheless, he insists, a remnant will turn to the Lord in the end. The dead branches have been cut off to make room for the gentiles to be grafted in, and the old branches will be grafted in again at the end. The horticultural image obviously does not work – you can't graft in dead branches – and finally Paul simply throws up his hands and praises the inscrutable wisdom of God. Of course, as Christians we should never lose sight of our shared inheritance of faith with our Jewish brothers and sisters.

Gospel: Matthew 14:22-33

The community of faith is often depicted as a boat, with Peter at the helm (a reason why the main part of a church is called the 'nave' ...). As in a boat so in the Church and so in an extended family, everyone has their part to play: children to bring the excitement and the challenge, parents to take the responsibility, grandparents just to be there to comfort and reassure. Without Jesus the disciples were getting exhausted, frustrated and probably bad-tempered and quarrelling. When Jesus appears everything changes: first, terror and awed amazement, then Peter rushes to meet him – and loses confidence, only to be swiftly rescued. How does Jesus come to me? In the joys of family? In the unwelcome criticism of an angry neighbour who tells me the truth about myself? In the worries of a job or the agonies of a failed relationship? In the staggering beauty of creation? In physical pain? All these can bring God's presence, and without that presence we cannot expect to cope. Jesus does not force himself upon us. He just jogs us, and says, 'Here I am if you want me.' He may disappear into the sea-mist again for a time, and we may sink into the water like mistrustful Peter. But it all ends with a welcome and a recognition that Jesus can cope even with a life-threatening situation.