

January 25, 2004

Third Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the three New Testament versions of the Lord's walking on the water (Mark 6:43-52; Matthew 14:22-33; John 6:15-21), Matthew's is perhaps the most unique and distinctive, because he alone tells of Simon Peter attempting the same thing.

This story in Matthew begins very much as it does in Mark and John; in all three narratives, the walking on the water immediately follows the multiplication of the loaves. After that event, the Lord compels the Twelve to depart by boat, while He Himself ascends, alone, a nearby hill to pray. Night falls, and the rest of the story takes place in the darkness.

The apostles' boat, going westward across the Sea of Galilee toward Gennesaret, about five miles away, encounters strong head winds that stir the tossing waves. Hour by hour the boat's progress is very slow, and by the fourth watch of the night, between three and six o'clock in the morning, the apostles are still a great way from land.

Suddenly Jesus appears in the darkness, walking on the waves of the sea. The startled apostles, conjecturing the figure before them to be an illusion (**phantasma**), but nonetheless frightened at the sight, cry out in panic. In response the voice of Jesus comes to them through the darkness, borne on the whirling courses of the wind: "Take heart, it is I. Be not afraid."

In the gospels of Mark and John, the drama of the scene ends at this point, and Jesus enters into the boat. Thus, these two accounts climax with Jesus' self-identification: "It is I," or more literally, "I AM" (**ego eimi**). Indeed, in John's Gospel this is one of several places where Jesus utters those very words that resounded of old from the Burning Bush (cf. John 8:24,28,54; 13:19; 18:5). The theophany on the sea involves words as well as vision.

All of these theophanic components of the story are likewise found in Matthew's account, but in this gospel they do not form the story's climax; they are but the first half of the scene. In Matthew, when the voice of Christ calls to the apostles out of the darkness, someone in the boat replies to Him. Here the Lord's proclamation, "It is I," is not answered with silent acquiescence, but with an expression of doubt, or perhaps even of challenge. "Lord," says the ever surprising Peter, "if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."

"Come," said Jesus, and Peter in obedience stepped over the side of the boat. Still looking at the Lord, he planted his foot solidly on a wave and began to walk across the sea. We are not told how many steps Peter took, but as he moved away from the boat his attention became diverted by the storm. "But when he saw that the wind was boisterous," we are told, "he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried out saying, 'O Lord, save me!'"

"Stretch out Your hand from above," prayed the psalmist, "rescue me and deliver me out of great waters" (Psalms 144 [143]:7). The prayer was heard. "And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him." Jesus and the embarrassed apostle climb into the boat.

Peter's name means "rock," and it is ironical that his attempt to walk on the water was the only occasion on which he demonstrated a truly rocklike quality. This man "of little faith" serves in Matthew's version as a symbol of every believer who walks toward Jesus in darkness and turmoil. Even in his failure, he is not condemned; he is saved by the extended hand of Jesus.

Although Mark and John tell this story as a theophany, it is curious that neither of them ends it with an explicit act of faith on the part of the apostles. Indeed, in Mark's account we are told that "their heart was hardened."

In Matthew, however, the story ends with the confession of faith by the apostles in the boat: "Truly You are the Son of God." That confession of the apostolic faith, towards which the whole narrative builds, seems to call for three further comments.

First, it is substantially identical with Peter's Christological confession at Caesarea Philippi, two chapters later (Matthew 16:16). The two stories, both of them about Peter, are bound by that same confession of faith.

Second, Matthew makes an explicit point of the fact that the confession of faith took place "in the boat," a detail rather superfluous unless there is a special symbolic meaning in the boat. We are surely correct in seeing the confessing Church symbolized in Peter's apostolic fishing boat.

Third, when they make this proclamation of faith, the apostles are prostrate in adoration (*prosekynesan*). This is the same posture in which they will later receive the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel (28:17-20). Ultimately, then, it is not sufficient to describe Matthew's story of Peter on the water solely as one man's walk in faith. It is an account, rather, of the faith of the confessing Church.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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