

19th Sunday (Year A) 2011

Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

Each of today's readings depicts a fiery, passionate, flawed man who gave witness to God's truth.

Elijah the Tishbite was a wild man in appearance and fiery in temperament. He wore a hairy garment and a leather belt and his hair and beard may have been so long and thick that they provided a further covering for his body. He lived around 850 years before Christ at the time that King Ahab ruled the northern kingdom of Israel and he was ruled by his wife the infamous Jezebel. Under her influence pagan temples have been built and priests of the god Baal have great influence in the realm. Elijah appears as prophet of the one God, Yahweh. He arranges a contest between the priests of Baal and himself. The test is who can bring down fire to consume the offerings on the altar. The priests of Baal dance and gash themselves and fail; Elijah succeeds; and he has the priests put to death. Jezebel is furious and sends Elijah a death threat. Elijah flees across the desert. He arrives at Mt Sinai where Yahweh had given the Law to Moses. He is depressed, alone and wants to die. Then we hear the passage that is today's first reading. Yahweh appears but not in fire and earthquake (as he had appeared to Moses). He appears in the still, small breeze. The fiery prophet begins to understand that he has not understood God. God is not a god of mighty demonstrations of power and omnipotence. He is a God who acts in a way that is almost invisible, clear only to those who have stillness in the depths of their soul.

Paul of Tarsus was a passionate man. He couldn't do anything, whether persecute the Church or promote Christ as Lord, in half measures. It was all and everything always for Paul. We get a sense of that in the remarkable passage that is our second reading today. In this section of his letter to the Romans Paul is dealing with the issue of the salvation of the Jewish people. Has gone back on his word to them and reneged on his promises? We hear an astonishing outburst of passion from Paul for his race, He would be damned he says, cut off for ever from Christ if it meant that the Jewish people were saved. Paul is exaggerating to make his point. He has just told us that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. This presumably includes Paul's own hyperbole. He is also echoing the words of Moses. After the apostasy of the people who were worshipping the Golden Calf just as Moses was receiving the Law from God. God had said he would annihilate them because of their sin. Moses intervenes. "If you will not forgive their sins," he says to Yahweh, "Then blot me out from the Book of Life." Paul might be accused of arrogance in comparing himself to the great Lawgiver. But the intensity of his feeling cannot be doubted.

Peter, chief apostle, was a man who was enthusiastic to the point of being foolhardy. "Outspoken" is one way to describe Simon, son of Jonah. "He opens his mouth to put his foot in it" is another. Peter's tongue could rattle off at a hundred miles an hour while his brain was still in neutral. But he wasn't all talk. Like a silly schoolboy or

Ian Bell he would DO things before his brain started working too. One example occurred the night of Jesus' arrest. First the loud bravado: "I'll never desert you, Lord", but he runs away with the rest. Then the foolhardy act of loyalty, following the arresting group into the courtyard. Then the cowardly betrayal - "I do not know him", three times repeated before the cock crow.

A similar pattern occurs in today's Gospel. Interestingly, some scholars believe that the origins of this story lie after Jesus' resurrection and Matthew has placed it here in the ministry for his own reasons, lost to us.

There is a similarity to the event recounted at the very end of John's Gospel, the chapter called 'The Epilogue', when Jesus meets his disciples at the Sea of Galilee. You'll remember that on that occasion Peter throws himself from the boat into the water to get to Jesus. Jesus is on dry land and the water is shallow. Later Peter is reminded of his lack of faith in the courtyard after the arrest. By another charcoal fire Jesus three times asks, "Do you love me?" and three times commands his chief apostle "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep."

Whatever is the origin of the story of the *Walking on the Water* the narrative is rich in symbolism. The lake is described as 'the waters'. Crossing the water is a frequent image for the passage from life to death and beyond. Water is a symbol for sin and chaos, terror and the power of evil. So walking over water represents authority over sin and evil. Earlier in the Gospel Jesus has calmed the storm at sea - power in the Old Testament reserved to God. On that occasion the disciples had asked "Who is this man?" the question is left hanging, unanswered. On this occasion the question is answered, "Truly you are the Son of God", and the disciples bow before Jesus, an action proper only in the presence of God.

Throughout his Gospel Matthew is asking the question, "Who is this guy?" And he keeps answering the question for the discerning, careful listener: This is the son of Abraham, son of David, son of Joseph (so it was thought) but also Son of God, worthy of worship, the Beloved of the Father, the Messiah, one who can do what God alone can do - master the wind and sea, forgive sins. He is Emmanuel - God with us. To see Jesus is to see what God is like when God comes among us, as one like us.

To this truth three fiery, passionate though flawed men gave their own characteristic witness.