

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 26th August 2018

“But I say to you, not even Solomon in all his glory was clothed like one of these. Now if God clothe in this manner the grass that is today in the field, and tomorrow is cast into the oven; how much more you, O ye of little faith?” (Lk 12:27b-28). I must confess what I have just quoted is not actually today’s Gospel, St Matthew (chapter six), but rather St Luke’s version of the same saying of Our Lord. While Luke spaces out Our Lord’s teaching and miracles throughout his Gospel, Matthew, on the other hand, starts off the Galilean ministry with the rather long ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (longer even perhaps than the one you are currently being subjected to!); today’s Gospel reading forming only a small part of it.

“O ye of little faith (*modicae fidei*)” (Mt 6:30) – Although there is a different, though equivalent, Latin phrase in St Luke (“*pusillae fidei*”), both Gospels have the single Greek word: ὀλιγόπιστοι, which is formed as such of ὀλίγος (‘little’ or ‘few’) and πιστός (‘faithful’). While there is obviously no English word which is derived from it, it is in fact similar to ‘oligarchy’ (namely, the ‘rule’ by a ‘few’). The word ὀλιγόπιστος (“O ye of little faith”) occurs only once in Luke’s Gospel (12:28), yet for Matthew its appearance in the Sermon on the Mount is the very first of several throughout the Gospel, all of which involve, in one shape or another, miracles.

After the Sermon on the Mount, there follows a chapter (chapter eight) almost entirely devoted to miracles. One of these is the calming of the storm on the lake. You probably know the story: “when he entered into the boat, his disciples followed him: And behold a great tempest arose in the sea, so that the boat was covered with waves, but he was asleep. And they came to him, and awaked him, saying: Lord, save us, we perish. And Jesus saith to them: Why are you fearful, O ye of little faith?” (Mt 8:23-26a). Here is the second appearance of “O ye of little faith (ὀλιγόπιστοι)” in St Matthew’s Gospel, and comes immediately before Our Lord performs the calming of the “great tempest”: “Then rising up he commanded the winds, and the sea, and there came a great calm” (Mt 8:26b) – “a great tempest”; “a great calm”; but “little faith”! “Why are you fearful, O ye of little faith?” – “Why [...]?” Although this time it is associated with a miracle rather than with teaching, “O ye of little faith”, as in “if the grass of the field, which is today, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, God doth so clothe: how much more you, O ye of little faith?” (Mt 6:30), is again addressed to the disciples by means of a question: “Why are you fearful, O ye of little faith?” (Mt 8:26a).

Christ poses these questions to his disciples because their faith is indeed made little by their attitude to everyday life. In the first case, worry: “Be not solicitous therefore, saying, What shall we eat: or what shall we drink, or wherewith shall we be clothed?” (Mt 6:31); and in the second, fear, and specifically excessive fear (as indicated by the word for “fearful”, δειλοί) of ‘losing’, losing a boat and of course one’s life, itself causing a distinct ‘losing’ of trust, of faith, hence: “O ye of little faith”. This term is again not one of rebuke for those without faith, but rather for those who are already faithful, so as to discipline them (they are disciples after all) and here to make them realise that to be “fearful” is to have drifted away from being ‘faithful’.

Fear and worry unfortunately continue to stifle our everyday lives as disciples, but that is not all! Pressing a fast forward button to chapter fourteen of Matthew, we find Christ’s disciples battling yet another storm on the Sea of Galilee. This time the Lord is not in the boat but has to walk on water in order to calm their fears as well as the storm itself. Even before the storm has ceased, Peter bravely (some may be tempted to say ‘foolhardily’) walks on the lake towards the Lord: “But seeing the wind strong, he was afraid: and when he began to sink, he cried out, saying: Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretching forth his hand took hold of him, and said to him: O thou of little faith, why didst thou doubt?” (Mt 14:30-31).



There are two things to note here: “O thou of little faith” again forms part of a question (though obviously using the singular “thou” rather than the plural “ye”); and Peter’s cry, “Lord, save me”, clearly echoes the one previously uttered by him, together with the other disciples: “Lord, save us, we perish” (Mt 8:25). Even if the cries reveal an element of trust rather than simply of desperation on the part of the disciples, the Lord still points out to them their littleness of faith: “Why are you fearful, O ye of little faith?” (Mt 8:26a) – “O thou of little faith, why didst thou doubt?” (Mt 14:31). The Lord points out to Peter not only his fear but also his “doubt”: and so it was just not Thomas among the apostles who could be called ‘doubting’!

We have now seen the third occurrence of “O ye of little faith (ὀλιγόπιστοι)”, although in the form of the singular, “O thou of little faith (ὀλιγόπιστε)”. Moving on to the fourth, in chapter sixteen of St Matthew’s Gospel, we discover that “when his disciples were come over the water, they had forgotten to take bread” (Mt 16:5). There is certainly no way of getting away from boats: anyway, some of them were fishermen of course. Christ then tackles them head-on in regard to worrying about bread by asking yet another question: “Why do you think within yourselves, O ye of little faith, for that you have no bread?” (Mt 16:7-8). They clearly do not remember the Sermon on the Mount: “Be not solicitous therefore, saying, What shall we eat [...]?” (Mt 6:31), never mind the two feeding miracles: “Do you not yet understand, neither do you remember the five loaves among five thousand men, and how many baskets you took up? Nor the seven loaves among four thousand men, and how many baskets you took up?” (Mt 16:9-10)!

If our worry, fear, and doubt, are the result of our having “little faith”, it seems only sensible then to ask God to ‘enlarge’, as it were, our faith. The Collect for last Sunday, the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, in fact made the same request: “Almighty and everlasting God, grant unto us an increase of faith, hope and charity (*Omnipotens sempiterne Deus, da nobis fidei, spei, et caritatis augmentum*)”. And yet the disciples themselves prayed this very prayer for faith, though it took them quite a while before they actually got round to it (in chapter seventeen of St Luke, the same Gospel with which we started): “the apostles said to the Lord: Increase our faith” (Lk 17:5).