

Matthew 14: 22-33

22 And immediately Jesus made them get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side of the lake, while he would take care of sending the people away. 23 And when the people were sent away, he went up the mountain to be apart to pray; and when evening came, he was there alone. 24 The boat was already several hundreds of yards from the shore when it came up against the waves which were moving with a headwind. 25 It was between three and six o'clock in the morning, when Jesus came to them walking on the water. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they went into a panic, thinking they saw a shadow of the dead world, and they began to cry out for fear. 27 But immediately Jesus intervened and said to them, "Be confident! It is I! Do not be afraid!" 28 Replying to Jesus, Peter said, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water". 29 Then Jesus said to him, "Come!" When Peter got out of the boat, he began to walk on the water toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the power of the wind, he was afraid, and began to sink into the water, and he cried out, "Lord, help!" 31 Immediately Jesus took hold of him with an outstretched hand, saying, "You have so little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 When they both got into the boat, the wind died down. 33 The disciples recognized his authority, saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

Gospel commentary - Homily

Where can I find the strength to keep going?

His name is John Lewis, and he just died. The movement in which he participated is beyond him: it began before him, and will continue after him.

On December 18, 1865, the U.S. Congress ratified the abolition of slavery with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, and with the ratification on February 3, 1870, of the 15th and last amendment, it prohibited the federal government and any state from denying any citizen the right to vote, regardless of race, color, and previous slave status. That is the political intention of recognizing the equality of every citizen. But life was to take a very different course, especially with the so-called "Jim Crow laws" in the late 19th century, which succeeded in disenfranchising blacks from the vote by introducing requirements related to taxes, literacy, comprehension tests, residency, and record-keeping. As soon as public schools were established, people "naturally" came together by race. In 1890, Louisiana passed a law requiring segregated compartments for rail transportation.

It is in this context that John Lewis was born in 1940, a black man from Alabama. At the age of 16, he was denied a local library card, which prompted him to start a petition, because was it not true that the library was also paid for by black taxes. But it was in 1961 that his non-violent protest movement began with Freedom Rides, where he and a group of blacks and whites traveled by bus from Washington to Louisiana to enforce the 1960 Supreme Court ruling that made segregation on public transportation illegal. Before the departure, everyone makes a will knowing what awaits them, except Lewis, who has no property. On the way, of course, they used the "wrong" restrooms and water fountains. In Birmingham, Alabama, they will be beaten with baseball bats, chains, lead pipes and stones, and thrown in jail. In Montgomery, the attack was so violent that Lewis was left unconscious at the bus station. In 1965, John Lewis led the march from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery over the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and this time it was the Alabama Police Department that attacked peaceful, unarmed protesters, a day that would be called "Bloody Sunday. Lewis will publicly chastise the U.S. president for failing to protect them. Five months later, the President signed the Voting Rights Act. Throughout his life, John Lewis will be put in jail 45 times.

That's a life with a rough ride. And it is to a stormy journey that today's gospel invites us. Yet it all began so well with that memorable moment of intimacy with Jesus that nourishes a great crowd. But now he is forcing everyone to leave, and forcing his disciples to go on boat. For the disciples, it is a horrible moment: they experience the absence of the Master who is now far away in his mountain to pray, and the boat is overwhelmed by the waves. For Matthew, this boat that is attacked from all sides is his community in Syria around the 80's or 85's, attacked by their Jewish brothers who consider them heretics and are about to excommunicate them from the synagogue, attacked also inside by dissensions between the conservatives who want the full application of Jewish laws and customs, and the "liberals" who claim the Christian freedom that St. Paul spoke of, and therefore threw all the traditional laws overboard.

What is Jesus doing in prayer in his mountain? For Matthew, who writes his gospel many years after Easter, Jesus has returned to his Father, and therefore appears far from the boat that is his community. Yet he flies to the rescue of the boat by expressing his authority over the evil that are the waves: risen, he shares with God the privilege of being able to trample on the forces of evil. But the disciples are unable to see him because they want someone they can physically see, touch and feel: so all they can see, in the midst of their near sinking, are the shadows of the world of the dead, the prospect of their own death, and perhaps that of Jesus if he has not risen. But how can we "see" Jesus? It is only through his word: "I am", the word that associates him with the world of God; this word alone makes it possible to regain confidence and no longer be afraid. According to Matthew, if we have faith, it is enough.

Matthew then features Peter, the spokesman for the disciples. Since his faith is not strong enough to really see Jesus, he asks him to command him to walk in his footsteps and in turn overcome the forces of evil, so that he can verify the presence of Jesus. Jesus' word is heard: 'Come'. Unfortunately, Peter does not go very far: with his eyes gazing the strength of the wind, and therefore the strength of evil, his faith does not hold out and he is swallowed up by the evil he intends to overcome, before Jesus rescues him. Matthew may have in mind his community leaders who call themselves "rabbi", "father", or "doctor" and, in their lack of faith, forget the spirit of service and compassion.

It is only the faith proclaimed at the end of the story in Jesus the Son of God, i.e. sharing God's privilege of being able to overcome evil, that the boat calms down. For Matthew, this boat was first of all his ecclesial community, it was the Church, but today he would agree to extend this boat to all human beings seeking justice and compassion, as John Lewis did. The struggle against evil in all its forms must be based on an unshakeable faith, for we cannot expect to see or touch the results of that struggle immediately, and too often we see only the spectre of death. Did Jesus himself see the result of his struggle, he who was beaten before he was executed? But it is he who says to us today: Have confidence, do not be afraid, for I am with Him who is victorious over all these evil forces. It is he who says to us: "Come", to continue this fight that is beyond us. So... where is our faith?