

‘And Peter answered Him, “Lord, if it is Thee, bid me come to Thee on the water.” He said, “Come.”’

What does God require of us? Yes, He requires that we walk upon the water as well, believe it or not! Can you imagine that? Can anything be more disturbing: to be bidden to walk upon liquid, not solid. Thankfully, He does not require that we walk on air just yet, but He does bid us to walk upon the waters.

Among the elements of this creation, water has a central role in our religion. We know of its importance to natural life, for without water there is no life; its presence is sought by astronomers seeking life forms on other planets. But in the Orthodox understanding of Christianity all the elements of this creation are sacred; they point beyond themselves to their spiritual reality. So, water, consecrated at Creation with the in-breathing of the Holy Spirit, is the element, not only of Life, but of New Life, for we were all reborn of water and the Spirit in Baptism.

As ever, we can go to the Book of Psalms, the prophetic hymns of ancient Israel, where we can find the Messianic life of Our Lord prefigured in the songs of the Psalmist. *‘The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their waves. The Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, than the mighty waves of the sea.’* So says Ps 92. Yet, in the midst of the storm on the lake, Peter forgets all this, until Christ stretches out his hand to save him and stills the raging tempest. We find this anticipated in the words of Psalm 106: *‘For He commands and raises the stormy wind, which lifts up the waves of the sea. They mount up to the heavens, they go down again to the depths.... They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits’ end. Then they cry out to the Lord in their trouble and He brings them out of their distresses. He calms the storm, so that its waves are still.’*

But note Peter’s response: *‘Truly, Thou art the Son of God,’* he says, as later on at Caesarea Philipi, Peter confesses Him as the

Christ, the Son of the living God. Truly, this incident on the sea is one of those poignant events recorded in the Holy Scriptures, revealing God; those direct encounters with the divine. Think of Abraham at the Oak at Mamre, meeting the three angels, or Moses at the Burning Bush coming to know *I-Am-Who-I-Am*, with whom he will commune for forty days and forty nights in the deep darkness that surrounded Mount Horeb. We may call to mind the great prophet Elijah, who finds in a time of apostasy that the Lord God has not abandoned His faithful remnant but speaks to Elijah in the cave through a still, small voice. And the one who foresaw Christ's birth from the Virgin and announced the coming of the gospel, the prophet Isaiah: in his visions he saw the heavenly liturgy of the angels and heard the Thrice-Holy hymn sung on high. You see how important it is that we know the Old, as well as the New Testament!

From all of these our God required much. But we must understand this, that for those who would know the True and Living God, there are demands and requirements. As I have told you before, in sailing on the sea of faith there are no passengers in the ark of salvation; we are all members of the crew.

Put to the test, even in Paradise, our human nature fell in Adam, unable to keep the requirement of one commandment. So began the long journey of everyone through a life that could only end in death in this world; but there was also the patient endurance of God, welcoming any who would seek Him. Among the first named generations we are told in the Book of Genesis of Enosh the son of Seth, in whose days men began to call on the name of the Lord [Gen.4:26]. And of Enoch, who '*walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.*' [Gen.5:24]

Yet more was required of Abraham who, though he did not walk upon the water like Peter, was called rather to leave his home and walk upon the sands of the wilderness. But Abraham was still asked for the seemingly impossible: to offer up his own son, Isaac. It is a disturbing story, reflecting perhaps those ancient pagan cults among the Phoenicians and the Canaanites who offered their own children in sacrifice to their demonic gods. And as the Psalmist recalled to his horror among the apostate Israelites: '*They even sacrificed their sons*

and their daughters to demons, and shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the land was polluted with blood.' [Ps 105:37-38] So why does the Lord ask this of Abraham? Why, at the last moment, does the angel of God forbid the sacrifice? Because Abraham had already shown himself to be the Father of Faith; *faith* is the offering that God required of him.

And what of Moses, who is sent on a mission to try the patience of Pharaoh in Egypt, in order to free the children of Israel from bondage? He pleads with God that he is not a good speaker, halting in his speech, yet he must still be God's spokesman, so that Moses the renegade from Egyptian justice becomes Moses the God-seer. He must lead a wayward and stiff-necked people for forty years and at the same time, teach them the commandments of God.

There is not enough time to review them all, all those who populate the stories of the Old Testament, called by God to do daunting tasks. We might talk of Gideon who had to fight against impossible odds to deliver Israel from the enemy; of the prophet-king David whose purpose became that of founding a house for God in the flesh. Not only did he provide the material to build the temple in Jerusalem that his son, Solomon the Wise would construct, but also, he provided the very family line from which the Christ Himself was to be born, God incarnate, so that David became the very ancestor of God; what an incredible and paradoxical title!

Think of all those who, in their lives, suffered persecution for the faith of Israel: the prophets Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah; of the Maccabean martyrs whose feast we kept a few days ago; and culminating in the Forerunner and Baptist, John, who was even called upon to go before Christ into death, preparing not just the lost sheep of the House of Israel on earth for the coming of Christ, but even the dead of past ages, as well.

Peter, losing sight of Christ, and seeing the rising waves, began to sink under the water. What did he lack that God found in the great ones of the Old Testament other than faith, the faith that he at immediately confesses, once Christ takes hold of him.

And what of us? For Christ has taken hold of us, as well! We too have gone down into the waters and have died with Christ in Baptism and have been raised with Him to walk upon the waters now, and to carry the cross with Him. Contrary to the popular idea of what constitutes a good life, we are summoned to an extraordinary way of living: sojourners and strangers here, but citizens indeed, even now, of the kingdom of heaven.

And we know also that if, like Peter, we too lose sight of Christ, we too shall begin to sink beneath the waves. Once we allow ourselves to become distracted, too absorbed in the demands, temptations and pleasures of this life, it is inevitable that we will become daunted, overwhelmed with fear and anxieties, which is the natural condition of fallen Adam.

But the truth is, if we are driven by our faith, Orthodox Christianity provides all we need to build the temple, both in the inner man, and in communion with the Church of the Living God. We have all we need through prayer and fasting, generous charity, liturgical worship, repentance and ascetic struggle, the grace that comes through the holy mysteries of communion in the Holy Gifts, confession and anointing; the holy images, the blessing of holy water, the wisdom of the scriptures, the true doctrines of holy Tradition, the sacred ministry of our pastors and the fellowship of the people of God. What more can I add, for we lack nothing in our provision for the spiritual journey in Christ. So, when the storm comes, do not fret over the size of the waves, like men of little faith, or *second waves* for that matter! Fix the mind on Christ and we shall walk upon the water.