

19<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (August 13, 2023)

Elijah the prophet was on the run because he ran afoul of King Ahab's wife Jezebel—she wanted the prophet killed. So Elijah hid in the cave and awaited the Lord's presence. It came; not in wind, fire or earthquake, but rather in 'a tiny whispering sound.' Centuries later, Peter saw Jesus walking on the stormy sea. He wanted to do the same thing and Jesus invited him to come forth. Peter was fine so long as he kept his eyes on Jesus; but once he looked away and saw the big waves, he got scared and began to sink. He cried out 'Lord, save me!'...and Jesus did.

Do we hear the voice of God amid all the distractions, all the noise that constantly surrounds us? Do we want to hear the voice of God, do we want to know and do his will...or do we sink into the noisy waves of our TVs, radios, smart phones, social media and all the other distractions that our culture offers us? I'm not suggesting that we all go to the monastery and live only in silent prayer—some are called to that vocation, but I don't think that is the case for any of us here today.

Still...do we hear the voice of God; do we want to do so? Do we take some active, intentional steps that will better dispose ourselves to hear that divine voice? Elijah did—even as he was running for his life and hid in that cave. God told him to stand outside and encounter him. Elijah did, without being distracted by the wind, fire, and earthquake, and he indeed heard the presence of God in that tiny sound. Peter wanted to hear Jesus' voice: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water". Jesus did, and Peter walked...until he looked away and began to sink.

Tomorrow, on August 14, the Church celebrates the feast of St. Maximilian Kolbe—a Polish Franciscan priest who was put to death in Auschwitz (one of Nazi Germany's most notorious death camps) on that same date in 1941. Hitler, of course, wanted to completely exterminate the Jewish people, but he also had a special hatred Catholic and other Christian clergy, and Kolbe was one of the thousands who were rounded up and imprisoned in those camps. At one point in his confinement in Auschwitz, one of the other prisoners escaped. As a punishment, ten other prisoners were randomly chosen to be starved to death. One of those ten was a young Polish soldier who cried out in despair "My wife! My children!" Fr. Kolbe heard that pitiful cry, he calmly stepped forward and volunteered to take that soldier's place in the starvation bunker. He was allowed to do so. The ten men were marched into the bunker where they were stripped of all their clothing and then locked in with no food or water.

Can we even begin to fathom what those ten men experienced? You could easily imagine them crying out in utter agony and despair, and that was certainly the norm in such cases. But not this time—a guard on duty in the death bunker witnessed their last days, and he heard Fr. Kolbe leading the others in offering prayers and singing hymns. This went on until their voices weakened and finally stopped altogether. The guards went in and found that Fr. Kolbe was the only one still living. He was given an injection of carbolic acid that killed him almost instantly. By the way: remember that young Polish soldier who was randomly chosen to be killed until Fr. Kolbe volunteered to take his place? He survived Auschwitz and World War II...and he was present in Rome when Fr. Kolbe was canonized as a saint in 1982 by Pope St. John Paul II. Imagine what was going through that now-older man's heart, mind and soul—to see the man who saved his very life now declared a saint of the Catholic Church. He had to be nearly speechless with sheer amazement and gratitude!

The faith, the courage, and the heroism of St. Maximilian Kolbe was extraordinary in every sense of the word. And I'm not saying that we have to endure everything he did or to the same degree. But I bring this saint to your attention to show that it is always, always possible to hear the voice of God and to be guided and strengthened by that voice no matter how awful the circumstances we have to grapple with.

In the gospel, when the disciples first saw Jesus walking on the water, they were 'terrified'; they thought they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus called out: "take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." In the midst of all the noise and violence of the stormy waves that pervaded Auschwitz, St. Maximilian heard that same divine voice and those same divine words. He knew the grace and presence of Jesus even in the midst of that pit of diabolical evil, and he was able to be a solid rock of strength and consolation for those who were condemned with him.

In the midst of all the noise and distractions of our 21st-century life, let's not forget: Jesus continues to call out to each one of us in order to share his amazing love and powerful grace with us. His voice is often like that 'tiny, whispering sound' that Elijah heard, and so we need to pay attention and to listen for him. Jesus won't necessarily drown out all the loudness that surrounds us with an even greater loudness of his own, and so we need to listen and pray for the desire to hear and heed his word. We can keep our eyes of Jesus; we can hear his voice...if we want to.