

Sometimes storms come upon mariners without warning, and this well-known fact is one of the most important reasons why working on the water is rightly regarded as a dangerous profession. Some people would say you'd be crazy to risk your life working on the water for low pay. The only thing crazier than that would be seeking out violent water intentionally, and paying good money for the privilege of navigating it in a vessel without rudder or sails and propelled by a crew of amateurs you've never met. Does that mean this is a bad time to mention that I've gone whitewater rafting on multiple occasions? Probably. Although I can say that bouncing and swerving through miles of the most challenging rapids that are open to the public can do wonders for your prayer life. Especially when you believe you're going to get pushed out of the boat.

When you go rafting, before the raft even touches the water, you learn the essentials of the sport. About 10% of the briefing covers how to paddle; the other 90% is how to stay in the boat, why you should try really hard to stay in the boat, and how not to die if you do end up outside the boat. Since there's nothing to hold on to but your paddle, the only way to make it through the rapids is to wedge your feet into pockets in the floor of the raft. But even if you do this correctly, you can still get into trouble fast if the raft flips over or, as I experienced, the raft pitches up at an angle that makes your feet slide backwards, out of the pockets. Even then, keeping them in place is not impossible, only difficult, which is why I'm here with you today. My fellow customers and I might have been crazy for paying to ride through dangerous water, but there are degrees of crazy. After hearing the guide's instructions and warnings, none of us would be crazy enough to voluntarily leave the boat.

So if we inexperienced amateurs were prudent enough to heed the warning to stay in the boat at all costs, why on earth would a veteran fisherman like Peter ever leave the relative safety of his beloved boat during a storm? It was an impulsive act even for him. If Jesus had commanded Peter to walk to him, perhaps as a test of his faith, that would be one thing. But leaving the boat was entirely Peter's idea, and his faith was faltering even as he expressed it.

Jesus had already identified himself and attempted to calm the disciples, saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." But Peter couldn't help vocalizing his doubt directly to Jesus; he said, "Lord, *if it is you.*" Jesus was probably saddened by Peter's doubt, but moved by his honesty in expressing it. And even when following Jesus isn't in our best interest as individuals, Jesus never turns us away. When, in our little faith, we try to be with Jesus in the midst of the storm, he will give us our shot, allow us to take the risk of being with him, even when he is someplace that no one should ever have to be.

From the war in Ukraine to the desperate children wandering in our desert borderlands, there are brave people risking their lives for the sake of strangers, people they have no obligation to help. They operate in places that God appears to have forgotten, places where evil seems to churn unchecked. But if Jesus can descend into hell itself to rescue the souls trapped in torment there, he can be present in the darkest

places on Earth. And he is, holding up good people and the good in people, whether they are there voluntarily or not, and whether they know his name or not.

At this point I have to talk about some of the symbolism in this passage. The boat and the stormy water certainly represent safety and danger, but on a deeper level, they also represent the Church and the world. I'm not making this up, this symbolic understanding is nearly as ancient as the Church herself. Remember that to Matthew's original Jewish audience, water symbolized the chaos of the world untouched by God; the boat was the community surviving in a hostile environment. It was a powerful metaphor for a small, oppressed community.

While both of these symbolic interpretations are valid, understanding the different implications is critical: while Jesus does sometimes call us to confront danger, take risks, and make sacrifices, Jesus never calls us to leave his Church. In exceptional circumstances, he may call us to leave one particular Christian community and go to another, but he never sends us away from *the Church* in the cosmic sense. Or to put it another way, Jesus may call us to take material risks, but never spiritual ones. He wouldn't have asked the Holy Spirit to unite us to him and to one another if it wasn't important that we be unified in this way. He wouldn't have reached out to us and revealed himself to us if he didn't intend to be in an enduring relationship with us. Even though the boat of the Church may not always feel like the easiest or most comfortable place to be, we are always better off here, together, even though we have our ups and downs, than in the wild uncaring water that surrounds us. But even where chaos seems to reign without restraint, Jesus is there, ready with an outstretched hand to grab the unfortunate ones.

We need to remember this when we hear verses like today's passage from Romans, which can easily be oversimplified and decontextualized. For while Paul is absolutely right to encourage us to hold fast to our faith and put it ahead of everything else, although Jesus is near us in the Church, and only Jesus can save us, it does not follow that those outside the Church are evil or condemned. Jesus is there for them too, like a good rafting guide, making every effort to save those floundering in spiritual chaos. Of course we can help them too, and we should, like Jesus did, but we can do more for them from where we are than by abandoning the Church and joining them in the drink.

We share with Jesus in proclaiming his message that God is with us, in order to save us, but our feet are only beautiful when they are wedged firmly where Jesus wants them to be. Ultimately Jesus will silence the winds of chaos and bring spiritual as well as temporal peace in his reign as Lord of all, the prince of peace. Until that day, we must stay in the Church, growing in faith, and obeying Jesus to the best of our ability, for our sake and for the sake of the world.