

# Calling on to a Sleeping God

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It is not difficult to imagine that in the face of existential fear of the forces of nature, wind, weather, water, earthquakes, pestilence and disease or other cruel forces, for instance, the wickedness of humans from time immemorial, people have always turned to another, more powerful force that had control over the forces of nature and humankind. From time immemorial, religions arose out of fear of the destructive forces that lie beyond the power of man. In this broader sense, there is a hand of God in the development of all religions. People depend, almost as if by instinct, on a metaphysical force to counter the destructive forces of nature with their rituals, their prayers.

Through the imagery of "sinking into the water", the psalmist expressed his existential distress through his enemies. He cried out to God for help. Psalm 69: "Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause; mighty are those who would destroy me, those who attack me with lies." (Ps 69:2-5).

For the psalmist, God has the power to save, since he is the creator of the universe and everything is subject to him: “In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it; for his hands formed the dry land.” (Ps 95:4-5). All, even the cosmic powers, obey the command of God: “he commanded, and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight... he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.” (Ps 107:25-26, 29).

God's mighty power often works through some people. It is not the holy people who have direct control over the forces of nature, but because of their special relationship with God, they can control the dangerous forces of nature. The holy people turn to God and do what God tells them to do. For example, Moses delivered the Israelites from the evil forces of Pharaoh.

In this sense, the disciples in the boat turned to Jesus Christ, their Master, in the face of a danger of the sea storm (Mk 4:38). They observed that their Master had a special connection with God. Their knowledge of Jesus Christ was growing. For them, Jesus Christ was a man of God. That Jesus is God, had not completely dawned upon them, although there were confessions that Jesus is the Son of God. For example, Peter confessed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Mt 16:16). In their distress at sea, they awakened Jesus

Christ (Mk 4:38) to use his special relationship with God, or at least to pray with them to calm the storm.

To their surprise, the disciples saw that instead of praying to God for help, Jesus acted as God. He, as God, gave a stern command to the wind and the sea, just as he had rebuked Satan on another occasion (cf. Mt 17:18): “Peace! Be still!” (Mk 4:39). Indeed, the wind and the sea obeyed their Creator: “And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.” (Mk 4:39). The disciples' reaction showed once again that their concept of Jesus Christ as God was developing: “And they were filled with awe, and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?’” (Mk 4:41).

There is a kind of parallel between the distress of the Israelites when they crossed the Red Sea and the disciples who were caught by the storm in the sea. When the Israelites were on the shore of the sea, they saw the Egyptians were marching after them and they were in great fear. They turned to Moses. Moses assured them that God would save them. The power of God worked through Moses. Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord made the sea dry and the waters parted. The people of Israel walked on dry ground through the middle of the sea. But the Egyptians pursued them. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The wall of water on the right and on the left returned and covered Pharaoh's chariots and horsemen; the Egyptians who pursued the Israelites were drowned in the water. (cf. Ex. 14:10-30). The same hand of Yahweh that the Israelites distrusted

in their distress at and in the sea (cf. Ex. 14:5, 11-12) saved them. The same Master in whom the disciples had almost lost faith when they were beset by the danger of a terrible wind and a storming sea (cf. Mk 4:38,40) saved them.

Another Old Testament comparison would have come to Mark's mind. This is the sleeping Jonah on a ship in a troubled sea and the sleeping Jesus in the boat during the storm. Each did what they could to steer the ship in the storm. Some threw the goods overboard, others prayed, etc. But Jonah did not do his duty, he slept. The captain of the ship woke Jonah up, complained to him and, recognising Jonah's special relationship with God, he ordered him to do his duty, to pray (Jonah 1:6). Similarly, the disciples in the boat on the troubled water complained to the sleeping Jesus because he did not do what he could and had let them down. (cf. Mk 4:38).

Jonah urged them that since he was the cause of nature's wrath, they must throw him overboard. So, they did. Jonah indirectly saved the ship and the people on board from the storm by the power of God. It was not Jonah directly who calmed the storm, but God (cf. Jonah 1:4-15). However, here, Jesus, the Lord, directly calmed the wind and the sea (cf. Mk 4:39).

After the calming of the sea, the reaction of the people on board the ship and the reaction of the disciples in the boat are almost the same, but with one significant difference. The people in the ship “feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD” (Jonah

1:16). Their fear and awe were not directed at Jonah. It was a fear of God. But the fear of the disciples in the boat was directed towards Jesus, whom, even the wind and the sea obeyed: “they were filled with awe” (Mk 4:41). Their fear of God was directed towards Jesus, their Lord.

The confrontation with the dangers of the forces of nature shows that people cannot save themselves alone. They must turn to a higher power, to God. The example of the disciples calling out to Jesus for help in the troubled sea shows to whom people must turn in all situations, especially in the danger of their own existence; it is to Jesus Christ, their Lord and God. Even though the disciples' understanding of Jesus as God was not yet fully developed, they called on Jesus for help. Even though their faith was not fully developed, they practised their faith. They called on Jesus for help. I would like to describe faith as “faith in action”. Perhaps we can say that Christians have a mature faith compared to the disciples in the boat. Christians have faith that Jesus is God. The question is whether their faith has become a faith in motion, a practising faith. The Christian faith will only be a true faith if they call upon Jesus, the Lord.

Jesus demanded an even deeper faith from his disciples when he rebuked their desperate crying out to him. They complained that Jesus (God) did not care when they were about to perish: “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” (Mk 4:38). It was a fundamental scepticism about the providence of God. Jesus' rebuke to his disciples was

corresponding: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” (Mk 4:40). The disciples were believers, but their faith was not deep enough. Even in the face of doom, even when there is a feeling that prayers are not being answered, even when there is a feeling that God is “asleep”, one must call out to God.

Jesus' question to his disciples, “Have you no faith?” (Mk 4:40) had also occurred in another context. When many of his disciples withdrew and no longer walked with him, Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” (Jn 6:67). The Christians are challenged to hold fast to faith in Jesus Christ against all odds of faith, or rather because of the oddities of faith. They see unbelief spreading around them like a pandemic. They also see that Christian faith, or any religious faith for that matter, is old-fashioned, as it is construed as an ignorance of science or even as a sign of a spiritual defect.

The courage to be with Jesus is also shown in the fact that, for example, some Christian missionaries in the world, although they have no Christians around them, celebrate Holy Mass alone. For they knew that the value of the Mass does not depend on the number of people present, but on the special presence of Jesus Christ. Through the celebration of the Mass, a missionary receives the strength to see people who belong to other religions as children of God and to work for the good of those people. This courage of the missionary priest must help other priests not to be discouraged from celebrating Mass alone, but to feel the urgency of celebrating Mass alone when the

faithful do not turn up for Mass. When one feels no interest in prayer, that is all the more reason to see the urgency for prayer.

Everyone who is convinced by the Christian faith to call out to God out of one's utter helplessness wants to carry out this faith ritually. In Acts, the Ethiopian, a servant of the Ethiopian queen Kandace, who was in charge of all her treasure, after hearing from Phillip about the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 8:27), wanted to live out this faith. On the way, the Ethiopian treasurer said to Phillip: "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" (Acts 8:36). They both went down into the water. Philip baptised the Ethiopian, most likely as the earliest Christian tradition of baptism was by immersion in water.

The initiation ritual with water is nothing new in human history. Almost all religions have rituals with water, with the symbolic character, above all, of purification. The Old Testament Jewish purification rites, for example, the *mikvah*,<sup>1</sup> were rituals by immersion in water. If one considers baptism only as a purification ritual, then one overlooks the radical aspect of the symbol of immersion in baptism. It symbolises calling upon the risen Lord from the depths of death. With His mighty hand, He brings out the person to the surface and gives a resurrected life. St Paul expresses this radical aspect when he describes immersion in baptism as burial with Christ and coming out of the water as resurrection with Jesus (cf. Rom 6:4, Col 2:12). He

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<sup>1</sup> "Mikveh", <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikveh>

connects the passage through the Red Sea with baptism (cf. 1 Cor 10:11-12). In the blessing of the baptismal water in the Easter Vigil by immersing the Easter candle in the baptismal water, the various Old Testament symbols are recalled: the great Flood of Noah's time, in which the living creatures were drowned, and the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites. When the Easter candle is immersed in the water, it is recited that all are buried with Christ through baptism. And the bringing out of the paschal candle from the water is also a symbol that those who are baptised will rise together with Christ to a new life.

In the end, life, the boat, will sink, will sink into the depths through death. Even from this final depth, where there is no more breath to take, one must cry out to God in faith: "Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD!" (Ps 130:1).