

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

First Reading 1 Kings 19: 9, 11–13

This week's passage from the First Book of Kings depicts the Prophet Elijah at the lowest point in his career. In the previous chapter, he had killed Queen Jezebel's 450 prophets of Baal and incurred her great displeasure. To escape her, he flees south into the wilderness, where he is looked after by angels who bring him food and water. After forty days and forty nights he reaches the mountain of Horeb, the mountain of God, also known as Mount Sinai, where he goes to the top of the mountain and enters a cave.

There are many parallels between this story and that of Moses as described in the Book of Exodus (especially Chapters 33 and 34): the mountain; the length of time spent in the desert; the presence of God; the signs of God in wind, earthquake and fire (Exodus 19: 18–19). The cave is reminiscent of the cleft in the rock where Moses had to hide when the Lord was passing by (Exodus 33: 22).

However, it is to be noted that if the cave provided a physical refuge for Elijah, his spiritual needs would only be met when he stood out at the entrance of the cave. When Elijah hears the 'still, small voice' of a gentle breeze, recognising the presence of God, he puts his cloak over his face as a sign of reverence.



The Lord was in the sound of a gentle breeze.

Gospel Matthew 14: 22–33

Today's Gospel passage comes just after the feeding of the 5000. In this section of the Gospel, Jesus is instructing his disciples about their mission.

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat ... while he would send the crowds away

The Greek word, translated here by 'made', is much stronger, akin to 'forced' or 'compelled'. His sending away of the crowds, mentioned twice, is also a sign of Jesus's authority.

He went up into the hills by himself to pray

Mountains and hills are places where God can be encountered (see today's First Reading). Just as there are times to pray as a community, Jesus also shows the necessity to pray on your own, alone with your God.

The boat, by now far out on the lake

Fishing boats of the time were of moderate size: 26.5 ft long, 4.5ft deep and 7.5 ft wide, able to hold between 5–10 passengers and a ton of fish.

A more literal translation indicates that the boat was 'several *stadia*' from the shore. A *stadium* is a Greek measure corresponding to 200 yards.

It was battling with a heavy sea, for there was a headwind

The Sea of Galilee is in fact a freshwater lake 700 ft below sea level, 8 miles wide and 13 miles long. Because of the surrounding hills 1200 ft above the sea surface, in the evening, there was a difference in the drop of temperature between the hills and the lake. The clash between cold and warm air led to sudden strong winds with waves 6ft high. The storm would last as long as it took for the lake to cool off. Because of their lack of scientific knowledge the people attributed these storms to spirits. Large bodies of water were seen as a places of evil, chaos and threatening powers.

In the fourth watch of the night

This Roman measure of time would be between 3am and 6am.

Jesus was walking towards them

Matthew, writing for a Jewish audience, knows they would remember Old Testament episodes where God controls water (Genesis 1: 6–7) or overcomes waves (Psalm 77: 16–19; Job 9: 8; Isaiah 43: 16). Jesus demonstrates his power over the forces of nature and chaos.

It is I! Do not be afraid.

This self-revelation echoes what God told Moses in the book of Exodus: 'I Am who I Am' (Exodus 3: 14).

Symbolism

The boat has often been seen as a symbol of the Early Church, still fragile at the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, subject to persecutions (storms) and saved by the presence of Jesus among them. To this day, many churches have a ceiling in the shape of an upside-down boat hull.

