

FALLING OFF THE BOAT



Mark 9:9 "Suddenly when (the disciples) looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus."

"Imagine," if you will, that "it is a quarter to midnight, and you are on board a small cargo ship with a few passengers like yourself, cruising somewhere in the middle of the North Atlantic, hundred of miles from anywhere. You have dined well and spent the evening playing bridge with the other passengers. The captain informed you all at dinner that at midnight the ship would cross another time zone and clocks should be advanced one hour. You finish your brandy and soda, and tell your bridge partners that you have decided to turn in for the night. You leave the lounge and make your way a bit unsteadily towards your cabin, for you have consumed a fair amount of alcohol and

it is late, but suddenly you decide to go up on deck and move your watch forward one hour at precisely midnight.

"Smiling to yourself at this sudden, rather whimsical decision, you make your way to one of the lower decks, the ship rolling heavily in the seas. You lean on the rail and watch the waves pitching below you in the moonlight. You listen to the crashing of the water against the ship. At one minute to midnight you take off your watch and clumsily prepare to move it forward one hour. But at midnight the ship suddenly dips into a trough and your watch slips from your fingers. You lean over the rail to catch it as the ship gives another mighty heave, and all of a sudden you find yourself going overboard into the water. There is no one near you as you slip and no one sees you plunge into the sea. By the time you surface the ship is already a long way off. In your panic you yell for help, but no one can hear you. 'They will notice my absence and turn around,' you say to yourself; until you remember that you had said goodnight to the others and told them that you were going to your cabin. No one will miss you until the morning, by which time the ship will be hundreds of miles away.

"You are alone in the sea, struggling to keep moving, trying to keep terror at bay. It is intensely cold and dark and empty all about. You swim towards the lights of the

ship that is now nothing but a speck upon the horizon. You are engulfed with a sense of loss and longing. You begin to think of your fellow passengers safely wrapped up in their blankets, snug in their cabins, dreaming peacefully in their sleep. The sea crashes around you, vast and pitiless, and a verse from the psalms comes to mind: 'Out of the deep I cry unto thee, O Lord: Lord hear my voice.' But there is no answer to your prayer, no hand reaches down from the heavens to pluck you out of the deep, no light from a rescue vessel cuts through the night towards you. You are completely alone, a tiny scrap of life, desperately trying to keep yourself afloat on the face of the great deep. You begin to tire, slipping in and out of consciousness as you swim blindly onward. And you begin to wonder whether there will there be any consolation for you as you sink, whether there will be any presence to steady you; or will you be utterly abandoned, unnoticed and unregarded as you slip below the waves?" *(paraphrased)*

That is an image I heard in a sermon more than forty years ago and it is a scene that has haunted me ever since, especially at this time of year, as we approach the season of Lent. It is a rather extreme paradigm of the inherent aloneness of life that besets us all at one time or another. For at certain moments in all of our lives, there

comes a feeling that we are utterly and truly on our own. In various ways and to various degrees, our ultimate aloneness troubles our consciousness. It begins perhaps in adolescence, as we become conscious of ourselves as individuals. It is reflected sometimes in our nightmares, as when we are falling and falling from some great height and there is nothing there to catch us. We are most aware of our aloneness, I think, at times of great fear or pain; as we lie dying, for instance, though we be surrounded by family and friends, we are likely to feel alone, for no else one can share our death with us. A woman may feel alone during childbirth even though her lover stands at her side caressing her arm, because the frightening momentum of delivery and the real pain of childbirth is only hers. We catch a sense of it in our own gut perhaps, while we pace the doctor's office waiting for the results of the blood test, or for the biopsy to come back from the lab.

Whether we are introverts or extroverts, there *will* be moments in all of our lives when we feel utterly alone, and must suddenly turn and face the solitariness of our existence. There will be times in each of our lives when we will fall off the boat and have to struggle on our own with the vast deep of the cruel sea. It is a fundamental part of the human experience.

Even Jesus knew this basic human struggle. In today's Gospel, yes, he is aglow with divine presence. He hears the reassuring voice from heaven calling out, "This is my Son, the Beloved." He is surrounded by Moses and Elijah. But in a few short weeks he will be abandoned on the cross, crying out in despair, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Earlier Jesus was baptized by his cousin John in the River Jordan and the presence of God was also overwhelmingly manifested there. Again we heard that reassuring voice from heaven and saw the dove from above alight upon him. But then in the very next moment Jesus was lead by the Spirit out in the vast and barren wilderness of the Transjordan, aimlessly wandering about and tempted for forty days and forty nights. He was famished and alone. There was no more sign of the divine presence of God, no reassuring voice from heaven, no breaking open of the clouds transforming the harsh surroundings. Instead we find Jesus struggling alone, with the devil, and with himself.

Is there any consolation for us at moments like that, these moments of great aloneness? Is there any presence there to steady us? This is a question, I think, that comes with our consciousness of life. And how are we to answer it? It is a question, I think, that so frightens us that most of the time we simply avoid it; we banish it from our

minds. We habitually pull back, keeping away from the railing, shivering as we look out at the raging sea through the safety of our porthole. Few people really choose to live close to the edge. Most of us are on board ship after all, tucked up in bed or finishing off that game of bridge, cruising through life. The lights are on, the music is playing, there is lots of pleasant company about: no need to think of the emptiness out there, the cruel sea, the loneliness, the hand slipping below the waves. But that vast emptiness and those moments of our ultimate aloneness are always out there.

And at some point in life we need to confront them. At some point in our life, we too need like Jesus to retreat out into the desert on our own for days on end, to spend some time there and reflect upon our predicament. All of us need, I believe, to jump overboard at times and test the waters; to learn to swim, to reassure ourselves that there is more to life than meets the eye, that there *is* indeed some invisible mystery or power or Spirit of God that encompasses and surrounds us, and provides us consolation.

We usually find that consolation or God's presence in the love of our family or the support of our community or friends. We can feel God's Spirit sometimes in the beauty of music or literature or ritual. We can often find the

God' presence in the feelings that accompany good works and right actions. But we must also learn to uncover that same Spirit within ourselves. We must learn to nurture that presence of God that we claim is within us; that breathe of God that we claim gives us life, and to grow comfortable with God's Spirit in us, and become confident of its presence there, so that we are not alone.

For each of us, I believe, longs to be reassured by that Presence. And the only way that I know to do that is to spend some time alone, deliberately alone, alone with God, and with our own devils and our own temptations. Whether it be on long walks in the woods or at the beach, or sitting quieting alone in the stillness of the night with the music and television turned off, and the lights dimmed, we need sometimes to intentionally isolate ourselves and face our aloneness.

For then and only then we will discover that we are never really alone. Then and only then, we can see what has been hidden by the busyness of our lives, and become confident that God is really always there with us. That God has not left us comfortless, that we can instinctively feel his presence and be reassured. For God alone my soul in silence waits, wrote the psalmist. For God alone is ever our source of consolation and strength, if we but have the

eyes to behold him. I invite you this Lent, therefore, to deliberately spend some time alone, really alone, to deliberately take some time to look and see and feel, and find God's presence within your life, for in so doing your life too will be transfigured. AMEN.