

Nineteenth Sunday *per annum*
Year A, 2026

1 Kgs 19:9a, 11-13a Rom 9:1-5
Ps 85 Mt 14:22-33

“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Let's pick apart these words of Jesus, spoken directly to Peter, once Jesus had grasped Peter with his own hand and held him, now safe and secure.

“O you of little faith.” The one word in Greek for this whole expression is *oligopiste*. You may think it strange that it takes five words in English to render what is only one word in Greek, but that's how languages work. If it's any help, you may think of it in this way: *“O you of little faith”* is six syllables; *oligopiste* is five syllables. So both in Greek and in English, it takes the same number of syllables to express the same meaning. *Oligos* means little, as in not much, a small quantity. *Piste* is a form of the Greek word *pistis*, which means faith. But *pistis*, in its primary sense, indicates fidelity, faithfulness, loyalty. It has overtones of trust, confidence. So when Jesus calls Peter *oligopiste*, he is pointing out that Peter, in this moment of crisis, has too little trust in him.

We can think here of another time in the gospel, when the disciples were unable to drive out an evil spirit and Jesus had to come do it himself (Mt 17:14-12). They asked him why they failed, and Jesus told them: *“because of your little faith”* – the same word: *oligopistis*. But then he both challenged and consoled them about the sufficiency of even a little bit of faith. *“If you have faith the size of a*

mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." Nothing, not moving mountains, not walking on water.

Jesus can do so much with so little. Wasn't this part of the wonder of last Sunday's gospel, when only with five loaves and two fish – not much at all – Jesus, trusting in his Father's goodness and providence, blessed, broke, and fed *"about five thousand men, not counting women and children"* (Mt 14:19-21)?

What a consolation! I don't have to have enormous quantities of faith, of trust, just a little. But at the same time, what a challenge! I don't seem to be moving mountains around, so how little faith I must really have. But no, I am not discouraged. Rather, I pray to Jesus after the example of the apostles themselves, when they asked him outright and up-front to increase their faith (Lk 17:5). That is an honest prayer, a humble request. The Lord will not be long in answering such a plea that comes from the heart.

So Jesus calls Peter *oligopiste*. This is not derogatory or disparaging. It is diagnostic. Jesus is speaking the truth to Peter about the state of his soul, the quality of his faith. And truth, as we know, sets us free (Jn 8:32). Jesus spoke those words about truth and freedom in John's gospel, where the scribes and the Pharisees, dialoguing with and questioning Jesus, were trying to figure out who he was, where he was from, who had sent him, and all the rest. They were wavering between belief and disbelief and so Jesus said to them:

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” To abide in Jesus’s word is to trust in that word, to make that word one’s home and shelter, one’s rock and refuge. Jesus’s word is truth as Jesus is truth. And in that truth alone are we free.

In our gospel today, Jesus spoke a word to Peter, *“Come.”* As long as Peter abided in that word, he was safe and did what was all but impossible, all but for that word. But then Peter stopped abiding in that word, and that’s when he began to be afraid and to sink. To have faith, then, is to abide in Jesus and his word, to remain, to trust in Jesus and in his word.

It was better for Peter to know the truth of things, that his faith was small and weak. With this knowledge, he could now cling to Jesus and keep moving toward Jesus, rather than to be deceived as to the strength of his faith and trust in himself. For Peter had just had the experience of such deception and disappointment and failure, when he had taken his eyes off Jesus and was at once overwhelmed by *“how strong the wind was”* and by the impossibility of what he was doing – walking on water! – and became frightened and began to sink.

It may be painful or unpleasant to receive the diagnosis that our faith is weak, but with that knowledge, with the truth, we now have the remedy: eyes, not on the storm that rages around me, but on Jesus; trust, not in myself, my own powers, my own

understanding, but in Jesus. His voice I will hear; his command I will obey; in his word I will abide; and in me, what was prophesied by Isaiah will come to pass: *“God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid”* (Is 12:2).

So that’s the first part of what Jesus says to Peter: *“O you of little faith” – oligopiste*. The second part is: *“why did you doubt?”* Doubt here is not the refusal to believe. It is not unbelief or disbelief. The Greek word here translated as doubt is *distazo*, which means something like “having a double stance,” “wavering between two positions.” There is uncertainty, hesitation. It signifies a halting vacillation or wavering, one foot in and one foot out; committed and not committed. This kind of doubt occurs within belief, and so, it is a point of weakness, and because it occurs in those who believe, it is a source of spiritual suffering for believers. *“I do believe, help my unbelief!”* (Mk 9:24).

With this in mind, we gain a deeper insight into Jesus’s question to Peter and into what Peter himself had just experienced. We might understand Jesus’s question to Peter as saying: Peter, why did you hesitate? Why did you waver? Did you really have to stop and choose between me and the waves? Was there really reason to think that, when I told you *“Come,”* my word would fail, that wind and waves were any kind of obstacle? Peter, don’t you remember how – only a couple of chapters ago in Matthew’s gospel (8:23-27) – I was sleeping in the boat when a storm came upon us and you and the other disciples were frightened and you woke me, and in

a panic said *“Lord, save us! We are perishing!”*? What did I say to you then, Peter? Don’t you remember? I’ll tell you. I said, *“Why are you terrified, O you of little faith?”* – *oligopistoi*. And what did I do? I *“rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was great calm.”* So Peter, Peter, *oligopiste*, why did you waver? Why did you hesitate? Why did you doubt?

Peter will have to process this experience and internalize its lesson. Maybe that’s why the gospel is silent at this point as to Peter’s reaction. The other disciples were amazed and did homage to Jesus, saying, *“Truly, you are the Son of God.”* Back in the boat, though, Peter is silent. I imagine him out of breath, panting, his mind rushing, his heart racing, his soul aching. He knows, he knows... but he does not yet fully understand. He is taking it all in, and that will take a while.

If you wish to pray with the scriptures, you can pick things up here and make this gospel episode your own prayer. We’ve read the text and meditated upon it. Now’s the time for contemplation. Enter the mind and heart of Peter. Let the words of the Lord Jesus spoken to Peter be spoken to you. Think about those times when you wavered between belief and unbelief, when you hesitated, stricken with doubt or worry or fear. Feel as Peter felt. Explore this moment, all of it: the wonder, the wavering, the doubt, the disappointment, the fear, the hope, the promise, all the rest. Know that you are safe, for you are in his word, abiding in it. So now’s the time for asking yourself (and Jesus) the hard questions. Now’s the time to realize

that your response in faith and trust hasn't always been the best. Now's the time to reckon with your little faith. And no worries, if it all seems too much. If you start to sink, just do what Peter did and cry out to Jesus, *"Lord, save me."* And what was promised by the prophet Joel will be fulfilled in you: *"all who call on the name of the Lord will be delivered"* (Joel 2:32/3:5).

By presenting this to you as I have done, I am sharing with you my prayerful reading of these words of Jesus. In them I see not so much an angry rebuke of Peter, but the words of a teacher who is trying to draw out of his student the promise that he sees in his student – a student who is at once bold yet timid, daring yet hesitant – a student who must learn some hard lessons now so that he will grow in grace and confidence, ready for the task that lies ahead. For one day soon Jesus will tell Peter: *"I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must go and strengthen your brothers"* (Lk 22:32). Jesus is preparing Peter for that day, for that task, when he will have to support those whose faith is small and weak.

Like for Peter, the Lord has a purpose for each of us. It is better that we reckon with the littleness of our faith now so that when the time comes, we will be prepared to answer the Lord's summons with boldness and conviction, without hesitation or wavering or doubt.

When Jesus bids me to come to him over the waves and wind and water, let my faith be ever so small, only let it be enough that I will

trust in him, remain in his word. And if doubt or fear or distress should assail me, I will call upon the Lord, cry aloud to God for help, and the Lord will save me (see Ps 18:3, 18:6, 55:16, 88:9, 141:1, 145:18). And this, too, is confidence, assurance, faith, when I sinking I cry out to Jesus, *"Lord, save me."*