

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 21, 2015

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A day at the museum is supposed to be fun. But there is a sad moment when you enter the Dutch Room in the Gardner Museum. Right away your eyes go to the empty frames that once held Rembrandt and Vermeer masterpieces. The stolen Rembrandt's subject matter is today's gospel. But since 1990 you can only see *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, 1633 in postcards and coffee table books.

In his painting the Dutch master gave us quite a storm. He had never visited the Sea of Galilee. But he had the ferocious squalls on the North Sea for inspiration. In the painting several disciple-fishermen are frantically attempting to lower the sails. The vessel appears in danger of being dismasted. One crewmember is seen leaning over the rail. You know what that means! In his painting Rembrandt has captured the moment *before* Jesus calmed the storm.

All is well that ends well, and in the end the disciples may not have had any more faith in God than at the start (and the Lord brings them up short for that). But they have been awed by the way their good friend Jesus can apparently command the sea and wind.

It never ceases to amaze us that late 19th and much 20th Century Biblical scholarship wasted its time trying to debunk such miracle stories. These people start from their conclusion that either Jesus is not God or else even if He is God, at the Incarnation He had "emptied Himself" of divine power. The argument insists the early Church was reading her faith back into otherwise perfectly explainable incidents. But it won't wash. The Church gathered and wrote down her memory of the apostles because she *did indeed* believe the Lord Jesus is God Incarnate. For that very reason she would not have dared fabricate such occasions as the disciples boldly reproaching Jesus for being asleep on a pillow at a time of maximum danger! The Church would only proclaim such things because they were *genuine remembrances of how things happened*.

Jesus asleep on a cushion is just one of many colorful details which have nothing to do with the central message of the incident. Another example is mention that other boats started out with them. There is the reference to time. They embarked "the same day" and later, "the even was come." And in a wonderful phrase we are

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also told the disciples took Jesus “even as he was.” Whatever that means, it shows the action of the *disciples* and not the Lord. All these historical incidents mean there can be no doubt the storm on the lake belongs to the earliest tradition of the Church and comes from the memory of eyewitnesses. Remember that when you are telling lies you have to be careful of what you say. The crowd condemning Jesus before Pilate discovered that problem! When you speak the truth you have nothing to fear. All right! That is my rant against German Biblical scholarship and their *formgeschichte*!

St Mark’s Gospel remembers the Lord’s very words. “Peace! Be still!” And we get the impression of Jesus as a tired but even-voiced parent who knows how to deal with his children whose games have gotten out of hand. And when His command was followed by a dead hush that seemed so uncanny, and unnerving the others in the boat, we get the feeling this unruly group of children was waiting to be told what they could do next!

In the Invitatory in the old Office of the Dead are these words: “*Deum, cui omnia vivunt; venite adoremus.*” To God all things are alive: O come let us adore Him. It is not just all men and women who are alive. All things *includes the body of the person being buried*. Every particle is still obedient to God’s creative will. This includes the wind and waves in today’s gospel. We remember other examples: the fig tree withered at the Lord’s command; the fever rebuked by Jesus left Peter’s mother-in-law; water became wine at the Cana wedding feast. Material things obey the Lord Jesus. And even the devils reluctantly come out at His command.

But when Christ spoke from the storm-tossed vessel it was for *our* benefit. The wind and waves have no ears! God imposes His will directly upon the forces of nature. But when “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” it was possible for the Divine Will to be put into humanly hearable words. Everything in nature is alive to God all the time, except us human creatures. The gospel is quite clear about that. Christ could still the storm at sea, and drive out devils. But when He sought to impose God’s will upon us He encountered resistance. So when Jesus said from the boat “peace, be still” it was for our benefit. We needed to hear those

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words! In all nature it is only our conscious minds that wander about, tantalized and tempted, and distracted from our true course by hundreds of influences.

What then does it mean to be alive to God? That is Saint Paul's phrase. It means that God, instead of self, is both the *object* of our desire and our *frame of reference*. Almighty God is to be the lantern lighting up the world for us. The thought of God is to be at the top of our unconscious minds and then well up into our conscious acts. Rembrandt's *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, 1633 shows us what it means to be alive to God. Jesus asleep on a cushion displays this kind of faith in the Father's care.

Monsignor Knox used to describe a faithful dog lying asleep in the room where his master is working. But the instant the master says any words in his direction, the dog's tail starts tapping the floor in pleasure that the master has noticed! *That comes close*. We are to be instinctively grateful like that, for every breath of grace passing our way, and acknowledge it with thanksgiving as God's gift. That is what it means to be alive to God, ready to listen to Him, and ready to obey His command.