

Historic Commentary

(Fifth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Mark 4:35-41 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Mark 4](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Athanasius](#): Even while he was asleep on the pillow, the Lord was testing his disciples, when a miracle was wrought that was calculated especially to put even the wicked to contrition. For when he arose, and rebuked the sea, and silenced the storm, he plainly disclosed two things: that the storm of the sea was not simply from winds, but from the fear of the Lord who walked upon it; and that the Lord who rebuked it was not a creature, but rather its creator.

They awakened the Word, who was sailing with them, and immediately the sea became smooth at the command of its Lord, and they were saved. They became proclaimers and teachers at the same time, attesting the miracles of our Savior, and also teaching us to imitate their example.

[Cyril of Alexandria](#): And so he sleeps, leaving them in fear, in which their senses would be sharpened to perceive the significance of what was to come. For no one feels what takes place in another's body as acutely as that which happens in his own.

[Tertullian](#): When he disperses its waves, Habakkuk's words are fulfilled, where he speaks of the Lord "scattering the waters in his passage." When at his rebuke the sea is calmed, Nahum's prophecy is fulfilled: "He rebukes the sea and makes it dry."

[Basil of Caesarea](#): Pay close attention to the Lord's words; whenever he instructs us about the Father, he knows that by using terms of personal authority, such as "I will; be clean"; and "Peace! Be still!" and "But I say to you"; and "You deaf and dumb spirit, I command you"; and other similar expressions, we will be led to recognize his authority as master and creator. By these encounters we are meeting the Father of the Son, the Father who creates through the Son. This does not insinuate that the Father's creation is imperfect, or that the Son's energy is feeble, but shows their unity of will.

Ephrem the Syrian: The ship carried his humanity, but the power of his Godhead carried the ship and all that was in it. In order that he might show that even his humanity did not require the ship, instead of the planks which a shipwright puts together and fastens, he, like the architect of creation, made the waters firm and joined them together solidly under his feet. So just as the Lord strengthened the hands of Simeon the priest, that his arms might bear up in the temple the strength that was bearing up all, so did he strengthen the feet of Simon the apostle, that they might bear themselves up on the water. So that name which bore the first-begotten in the temple was afterwards borne up by the first-begotten in the sea.

Augustine: When you have to listen to abuse, that means you are being buffeted by the wind. When your anger is roused, you are being tossed by the waves. So when the winds blow and the waves mount high, the boat is in danger, your heart is imperiled, your heart is taking a battering. On hearing yourself insulted, you long to retaliate; but the joy of revenge brings with it another kind of misfortune—shipwreck. Why is this? Because Christ is asleep in you. What do I mean? I mean you have forgotten his presence. Rouse him, then; remember him, let him keep watch within you, pay heed to him.... A temptation arises: it is the wind. It disturbs you: it is the surging of the sea. This is the moment to awaken Christ and let him remind you of those words: “Who can this be? Even the winds and the sea obey him.”

John Calvin: As we shall soon meet again with the mention of a lake, where it is said (Mt 8:33) that the swine were carried into it with violence, it is not universally agreed whether one and the same lake is mentioned in both places. The waters of Gennesareth, all admit, were pleasant and healthful to drink: but the Gadarene lake, Strabo tells us, was so unwholesome and pestilential, that the cattle which drank of it often lost their hair and their hoofs. There is therefore no doubt that there were two separate lakes, and that they were at a considerable distance from each other. There is as little doubt that the lake mentioned here was the lake of Gennesareth; and that Christ, having crossed it, came to the Gadarenes, whom Matthew calls Geresenes, (Mt 8:28.)

Those who infer, from the diversity of the names, that the narratives are different, through a desire to be thought very acute, fall under the charge of gross ignorance: for the country of the Gergesenes was also called Gadarene, from a celebrated city, Gadara. In the age of Jerome, the name was changed; and, therefore, in accordance with the prevailing custom, he calls them Gereseas. That it was the Gadarene lake into which the swine were thrown down by the devils, I have no hesitation in admitting: but when Christ says, let us cross to the other side, I cannot explain the reference as made to any other lake than that of Gennesareth.

It remains that we now inquire as to the time, which cannot be learned either from Matthew or from Luke. Mark alone mentions that it was the evening of that day on which Christ discoursed about the preaching of the gospel under the parable of the sower. Hence it is evident, that they did not attend to the order of time; and, indeed, this is expressly stated by Luke, when he says that it happened on a certain day: for these words show that he gives himself little concern as to the question which of the events was earlier or later.

Matthew 8:23. And when he had entered into a ship Mark says that other little ships crossed along with him: but that Christ entered into his own ship with his disciples Luke too quotes his words: Matthew is more concise. They agree, however, as to the leading fact, that Christ laid himself down to rest, and that, while he was asleep, a tempest suddenly arose. First, it is certain that the storm which agitated the lake was not accidental: for how would God have permitted his Son to be driven about at random by the violence of the waves? But on this occasion he intended to make known to the apostles how weak and inconsiderable their faith still was. Though Christ's sleep was natural, yet it served the additional purpose of making the disciples better acquainted with their weakness. I will not say, as many do, that Christ pretended sleep, in order to try them. On the contrary, I think that he was asleep in such a manner as the condition and necessity of human nature required.

And yet his divinity watched over him, so that the apostles had no reason to fear that consolation would not be immediately provided, or that assistance would not be obtained from heaven. Let us therefore conclude, that all this was arranged by the secret providence of God, – that Christ was asleep, that a violent tempest arose, and that the waves covered the ship, which was in imminent danger of perishing. And let us learn hence that, whenever any adverse occurrence takes place, the Lord tries our faith. If the distresses grow to such a height as almost to overwhelm us, let us believe that God does it with the same design of exercising our patience, or of bringing to light in this way our hidden weakness; as we see that, when the apostles were covered by the billows, their weakness, which formerly lay concealed, was discovered.

Lord, save us: A pious prayer, one would think: for what else had they to do when they were lost than to implore safety from Christ? But as Christ charges them with unbelief, we must inquire in what respect they sinned. Certainly, I have no doubt that they attached too much importance to the bodily presence of their Master: for, according to Mark, they do not merely pray, but expostulate with him, Master, hast thou no care that we perish? Luke describes also confusion and trembling: Master, Master, we perish They ought to have believed that the Divinity of Christ was not oppressed by carnal sleep, and to his Divinity they ought to have had recourse. But they do nothing till they are urged by extreme danger; and then they are overwhelmed with such unreasonable fear that they do not think they will be safe till Christ is awakened. This is the reason why he accuses them of unbelief for their entreaty that he would assist them was rather a proof of their faith, if, in confident reliance on his divine power, they had calmly, and without so much alarm, expected the assistance which they asked.

And here we obtain an answer to a question which might be put, and which arises out of his reproof. Is every kind of fear sinful and contrary to faith? First, he does not blame them simply because they fear, but because they are timid Mark adds the word οὔτω – Why are you so timid? and by this term indicates that their alarm goes beyond proper bounds. Besides, he contrasts faith with their fear, and thus shows that he is speaking about immoderate dread, the tendency of which is not to exercise their faith, but to

banish it from their minds. It is not every kind of fear that is opposed to faith. This is evident from the consideration that, if we fear nothing, an indolent and carnal security steals upon us; and thus faith languishes, the desire to pray becomes sluggish, and the remembrance of God is at length extinguished. Besides, those who are not affected by a sense of calamities, so as to fear, are rather insensible than firm.

Thus we see that fear, which awakens faith, is not in itself faulty till it go beyond bounds. Its excess lies in disturbing or weakening the composure of faith, which ought to rest on the word of God. But as it never happens that believers exercise such restraint on themselves as to keep their faith from being injured, their fear is almost always attended by sin. Yet we ought to be aware that it is not every kind of fear which indicates a want of faith, but only that dread which disturbs the peace of the conscience in such a manner that it does not rest on the promise of God.

He rebuked the winds Mark relates also the words of Christ, by which, addressing the sea, he enjoins silence, (σιῶπα,) that is, stillness not that the lake had any perception, but to show that the power of his voice reached the elements, which were devoid of feeling. And not only the sea and the winds, which are without feeling, but wicked men also, with all their obstinacy, obey the commands of God. For when God is pleased to allay the tumults of war, he does not always soften the fierce minds of men, and mould them to obedience, but even while their rage continues, makes the arms to drop from their hands: And thus is fulfilled that declaration,

He maketh wars to cease to the ends of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in pieces, and burneth the chariots in the fire, (Ps 46:10.)

But the men wondered Mark and Luke appear to say this in reference to the apostles; for, after having stated that Christ reproved them, they add that they cried out with fear, Who is this? It applies, however, more properly to others, who had not yet known Christ. Whether we take the one or the other of these views, the result of the miracle appears in the display of the glory of Christ. If any one shall suppose that it is the apostles who speak, the meaning of the words will be, that his divine power was sufficiently proved by the fact that the wind and the sea obey him But as it is more probable that these words were spoken by others, the Evangelists show that the miracle made such an impression on their minds, as to produce a certain reverence for Christ which prepared them for believing on him.