

12th Sunday of the Year (Cycle B)
(Job 38:8-11; 2 Cor 5:14- ; Mark 4:35-41)

The evangelists don't always spell things out for us; they expect us to figure things out for ourselves and even to know something of the Scriptures, including the OT. That is good pedagogy. If we have to reason to come to a conclusion, we will understand it better and remember it longer than if someone just poured it into our brains. For example, sometimes the meaning of a parable is explained to us (e.g., the parable of the sower), but more often we are left to puzzle it out for ourselves. In fact, in Mark we read that "without parables he did not speak to them. But to his own disciples he explained them in private" (4:34). However, although Jesus explained all to them, they haven't passed the explanations on to us. Kind of mean, you think? Well, not really; I think they intended to leave them for us to figure out.

But there are also things other than the parables for us to figure out. For example, I am sure that anyone one of you, if I asked, could explain what is the two-fold meaning Jesus intends when He speaks of being lifted up...? As I'm sure you know, it is because in John, Jesus' suffering and death is already the first stage of His glorification. So for Him "to be lifted up" signifies both His being raised on the cross and His being raised up in glory.

The question asked in today=s gospel, "Who is this whom even wind and sea obey?" is equally profound, and it

relates to Jesus' very nature, difficult for the earlier Christians to grasp and express in words. To understand fully, we need to be aware of the meanings "the sea" has in the OT.

"The sea" in the OT, can have a whole range of meanings. Sometimes the sea is treated almost as a demonic power--the enemy that only God can overcome. That goes back to old pagan myths in which the raging sea, equated with the Chaos Monster, is the starting point for creation, something the creating deity had to overcome before he could create. This is reflected in a number of OT texts, especially the Psalms: for example, "You rule over the surging of the sea; you still the swelling of its waves. You have crushed Rahab with a mortal blow" (Ps 89:10-11); "you stirred up the sea by your might; you smashed the heads of the dragons in the waters" (Ps 74:13-14). For the OT authors this would be poetic license, because they knew no power could challenge the Lord. When it comes to the official, canonical account of creation in Genesis 1, however, the demonic character is sanitized into the impersonal Abyss, which offered no struggle, and which God transformed into the cosmos.

But aside from the demonic aspect, the sea could be an obstacle and a danger that, again, only God could overcome. We see this, for example, in the exodus account of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. At a crucial moment, as they were fleeing the Egyptian army, there was the sea barring their way. The psalmist describes it in poetic terms: "the waters saw you, O God; the waters saw you and

shuddered; the very depths were troubled. . . . Through the sea was your way, and your path through the deep waters. . . . You led your people like a flock under the care of Moses and Aaron" (77:17-21). And, in general, the OT poets describe troubles and dangers as being threatened by deep waters; but in all this they look to God for help because He has mastered the power of the sea: "O Lord God of hosts, who is like you? . . . You rule over the surging of the sea; you still the swelling of its waves" (89:9-10). "More powerful than the roar of many waters, more powerful than the breakers of the sea--powerful on high is the Lord" (93:4).

These texts are helpful background for understanding today's gospel. Most especially, of many other texts which could be cited, is today's first reading from Job, which was chosen to go with that gospel: God says to Job, **A**who shut within doors the sea, when it burst forth....? who said, Thus far shall you come but no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stilled?@

One final OT quotation--one which today's gospel almost seems to be dramatizing. One of the psalms (Ps 107) presents various groups offering thanks to God for having been delivered from danger. One group are sailors who have escaped a storm at sea: as they were being tossed about by the waves, which "mounted up to heaven, sank to the depths; their hearts melted away in their plight. . . . (Then) they cried to the Lord in their distress (just as the disciples today); from their straits he rescued them. He

hushed the storm to a gentle breeze, and the billows of the sea were stilled" (Ps 107:26-29).

Today's gospel is a high point in Mark's teaching, but paradoxically, it is given only as a question in the mouths of the disciples: "Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?" For anyone familiar with the OT and the sort of texts we have been looking at, there can be only one answer. The early Christians were not yet ready to formulate what we call the mystery of the Incarnation, yet that teaching is given in this groping, wondering question. A statement such as "Jesus is God" would have seemed hard to grasp. Mark, the earliest of the gospels, can only place the mystery before us to contemplate, with that question, "Who is this?" Later, there will come the proclamation "Jesus is Lord," which can also be understood in the deepest sense, especially when St. Paul tells us that "God has given him the name [i.e., the divine name] above every other name." Or again, it comes to be understood that Jesus is "Son of God" in the sense that He is in every way equal to the Father. In John, the latest of the gospels, we have Thomas' confession, "My Lord and my God." But hardly anything can go beyond the implications of that question "Who is this whom even wind and sea obey?"

The mysteries God reveals are not intended to remain in the speculative order; they are presented to us so that we may know how to live. Already in today's second reading St. Paul, commenting on the death and resurrection of Christ, says that it was "so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him." We may ask,

"How do we live for Him?" First of all, certainly by fidelity and obedience. But equally important is to live for others; He Himself indicated that we are to recognize Him in others, even that our ability to do this would be the basis for our final judgment: "whatever you did it for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

This is perhaps the hardest part of Christian life. I don't mean simply **A**to live for others,**@** but to live for Jesus by living for others. It means looking at another human being, perhaps the down-and-outer, perhaps the one who mistreats us, and asking the question "Who is this?," and coming up with the right answer.