

Drawing a lesson from the storm

St John Chrysostom's Homilies on Matthew were preached in Antioch and show his keen engagement with details of the text. His main objective was promoting morality, so that in dealing with any passage he concludes with an exhortation to some special virtue. Here is part of what he says about today's Gospel. The citation is long, but it is full of keen insights: "Behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, so that the ship was covered with the waves, but he was asleep." Jesus took them with him, not by chance but in order to make them spectators of the miracle that was to take place. For like an excellent trainer, he was anointing them with a view to both objects; as well to be undismayed in dangers, as to be modest in honors. Having sent away the rest, he kept them and lets them be tossed with the tempest; at once correcting this and disciplining them to bear trials nobly. For while the former miracles were great indeed, this one contained also in it a major kind of teaching and was a sign like that of old. For this reason, he takes with him only the disciples. For as when there was a display of miracles, he also lets the people be present; so, when trial and terrors were rising up against him, he takes with him none but the champions of the whole world, whom he was to train. While Matthew merely mentioned that "he was asleep," Luke says that it was "on a pillow;" meaning both his freedom from pride, and to teach us hereby a high degree of austerity."

He goes on to moralize about the disciples' fear: "When the tempest was at its height and the sea raging, they awoke him, saying, "Lord, save us: we perish." But he rebuked them before he rebuked the sea, because as I said, these things were permitted for training purposes, and they were an image of the trials that would come to them later. Yes, for after these things again, he often let them fall into serious tempests of misfortune; and Paul also said, "I would not have you ignorant that we were pressed beyond our strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life;" and again, "Who delivered us from so great a death." Indeed, their very alarm was a valuable occurrence, that the miracle seemed all the greater and their remembrance of the event be made lasting. Having first expected to be lost, they were saved, and having acknowledged the danger, they learned the greatness of the miracle. So that is why he sleeps: for had he been awake when it happened, they would not have been fearful, or they would not have begged him. Therefore, he sleeps, to give occasion for their timidity and make clearer their perception of what was happening."

Chrysostom concludes, "He stretched out no rod, as Moses did, neither did he stretch forth his hands to Heaven, nor did he need any prayer, but as for a master commanding his handmaid, or a Creator his creature, so did he quiet and curb it by word and command only; and all the surge was immediately at an end, and no trace of the disturbance remained. This the evangelist declared saying, "And there was a great calm." And that which had been spoken in praise of the Father, he showed forth again by his works. For it says, "he spoke, and the stormy wind ceased." So here likewise, he spoke, and "there was a great calm." And the multitudes who wondered at him; would not have marveled, had he done it in such manner as did Moses."