

“Trust” - 19th Sunday (A)

Last weekend, on my way back from Lourdes, I stopped in Paris to visit a friend. As we walked through the centre of the city, I suggested we went on the Ferris Wheel in the Tuileries Gardens. Just as we got on I said to my friend, ‘I hate heights but I don’t want to be defeated by the fear.’ And for the first thirty seconds, everything was going dandy but then just as we reached the highest point the wheel stopped to let passengers on and off. And so, I and my friend were left, sixty metres up, hanging in the air.

My friend was loving this pause, for it was the view of Paris at its best and he kept encouraging me to look around but all I could muster was the weak response of ‘I can’t’ as I kept my eyes directed to my feet while inside myself I held tightly onto myself as panic grew. This is my way of coping with panic: hold onto myself and do my best to save myself. Realizing what was happening, my friend asked, ‘Shall we pray the Our Father?’ A perfectly beautiful suggestion! But that would mean somehow letting go of myself and placing my trust in God my Father. For a moment I struggled with the suggestion and then, in my own way, by praying the Our Father, I said like Peter, ‘Lord. Save me!’

We all know fear. We all know what it is to be seized by terror. That’s alright. But how silly of you and me to remain stuck in that fear, trying to save ourselves, when God is ever present to us! Should I be hundreds of feet below the earth or sixty meters above Paris, stuck in a flimsy metal box, God is with always with me and he will never abandon me or lose me. When you and I are sitting at home on our own or on a train full of people, God is there with us. When you and I pray it is not that we are sending up thoughts to someone light years away but rather we are talking to a person who has wrapped us up in His arms.

In tonight’s wonderful reading from the First Book of Kings, the prophet Elijah did not experience God in a storm, or an earthquake or in fire but in a gentle breeze. This particular passage reminds me to not have a patronizing attitude towards the Old Testament. We can think ourselves more sophisticated than our ancestors but they knew that God is not so much experienced in the fireworks of the natural world as that He is always with us, like a gentle breeze, which does not force itself upon us but caresses us when we are hot and bothered busying trying to save the world and ourselves, when Jesus has already done that.

I have just come from my annual retreat at Ampleforth, the Benedictine monastery. There was nothing sophisticated about it. I was doing what we all need to do: stop, shut up and be still in the Lord’s presence. We are always surrounded by the gentle breeze of His presence but we have to let ourselves regularly step out of the storms of life so to know this. And then, when fears come upon us, we shall be better able to trust that God our Father is holding us tight and will never let go.