Is It I Lord?
Answering the call

Walking On Water
Sinking like a stone

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Food for a restless mind

Is It I Lord?
Answering the call

Ask a five-year-old what they want to be when they grow up—despite those who fervently believe we are inherently gender-neutered—and you will inevitably hear such avocations as fireman, policeman, pilot, doctor or father from little boys and nurse, teacher, dancer, model, singer, or mother from little girls.

These are not in the least all-inclusive nor are they necessarily specific to gender, but you get the picture: small children know no limitations, believe anything is possible, find everything interesting, and glory in the newness of life. Nothing is dark, sinful, evil, or ugly; the world is full of wonder, beauty, joy, and laughter; the past too young, dwarfed by the infinite unknown spread before them.

Wistfully, we smile at such naive exuberance, knowing full well what they know not: too soon will life destroy idyllic notions; harsh reality will too soon play dirges to youthful innocence.

There comes a time, inescapable, when each of us must make a choice—no longer small and innocent, but older and we dare to hope, wiser—to be or not to be (that is indeed the question). Each has been called into being by God for a purpose he alone has divined. We are free to choose what path to take, and yet, God always knows what we will do and where we will go. He knows and calls each of us by name, wanting us to hear his voice, to listen to him.

But God seldom speaks to us in the obvious and expected; God never shouts. His voice never roars like the wind, nor does it cause the earth to tremble as an earthquake or burn from fire. No, God...
Walking On Water
Sinking like a stone

What is faith? Faith isn’t something you ever simply achieve. It’s not something that you ever nail down as a fait accompli. Faith works this way: Some days you walk on water and other days you sink like a stone. Faith invariably gives way to doubt before it again recovers its confidence, then it loses it again.

We see this vacillation between confidence and doubt today in the Gospel. The disciples are frightened by the storm which dangerously rocks their boat. Then, when Jesus suddenly appears, walking on the angry sea, they take him for a ghost, a spirit come to cause further distress. When Jesus speaks “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid,” their faith is buoyed, once again having confidence that Jesus will save them.

Peter, in his exuberance and confident in his faith asks Jesus to command him to come to him, to walk on the water. Jesus says, “Come” and Peter immediately steps off the boat and begins to walk on the water. But after taking but a few steps, Peter begins to doubt, and realizing what he is doing is impossible, he immediately begins to sink. Crying for help, Jesus reaches out and rescues him.

Our faith has its ups and downs, just as Peter, at first, so confidently stepped off the boat and onto the sea, only to, almost immediately, upon realizing what he was doing, lose confidence and start to sink. Faith is like that: at times it lets us walk on water and at other times we sink like a stone.

As long as we have faith in Jesus and don’t look down, like Peter, we can walk on water. No matter how large our failures or how grievous our sins, we can always come to the Lord. It may feel like walking on water, but as long as we don’t look down, as long as we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, as long as we have faith, anything is possible.

Faith works best when we don’t confuse it with our own efforts. For example, Donald Nichol, in his book, Holiness, writes of a British missionary working in Africa. At one point, early on in his stay there, the missionary was called upon to mediate a dispute between two tribes. He had no preparation for this, was naïve, and totally out of his depth. But he gave himself over to the task in faith and, surprisingly, reconciled the two tribes. Afterwards, buoyed by this success, he began to fancy himself as mediator and began to present himself as an arbiter of disputes. But now, however, his efforts were invariably unhelpful. Here’s the irony: when he didn’t know what he was doing, but trusted solely in God, he was able to walk on water; as soon as he began to wrap himself in the process, he sank like a stone. Faith works like that: We can walk on water only as long as we don’t think that we are doing it with our own strength.

In the first reading we hear of God calling Elijah to come out from hiding to hear God’s voice. Elijah thought he would experience God in a strong and heavy wind, or in an earthquake, or in a fire. Instead he found God in “a tiny whispering sound.”

Elijah, having been promised that he would find the Lord on the mountain, left the shelter of his cave. Sure enough, God showed up, but not in mighty gales or crashing rocks. The Lord was not even encountered in the earthquake or the fiery extravaganza. The Lord was in a tiny whispering voice that made Elijah cover his face in the presence of the Most High. Elijah was called in the quiet, in the “still, small voice” of God.

We too often think that God will be found in the great and powerful, and we wonder why so many people are never able to find or hear God.

Our sights have to be lowered, so to speak, from the powerful to the powerless, from the rich to the poor, from the satisfied to the suffering, from the oppressors to the oppressed. We have to listen carefully for the tiny whispering sounds of alienation and powerlessness.

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Peter and other disciples, tossed about by the waves and the wind, saw the Lord as a ghost approaching, walking on the water and were terrified. They heard the voice of Jesus telling them: “Get hold of yourselves! It is I! Do not be afraid!” Peter heard the call to cross the raging waters. But daunted by the strength of the wind and his own frailty, he began to sink in fear. Even so, despite his going under, Peter was called to faith in the midst of turmoil.

Fears rise as invitations to greater trust, if we only face them and move through them. Fear most often assails us when we are in danger of losing something or someone we treasure. It is understandable that we would worry about the possibility of losing something, someone, some strength in ourselves so reliable and so dear. But the threat of loss is the call across troubled waters.

The sinking feeling may be nothing other than the recognition of our inability to walk the waters on our own. Going under despite our efforts, we finally turn our faces up more honestly, more in faith, to the one who carries us. Ebbing powers and promise do not signal the end. They remind us that it is only in God that we are strong. Fright does not necessarily mean cowardice; it also invites the admission that we are wondrously dependent.

Storms are omens of deliverance as well as of disaster. If we break through to freedom in the following calm, we discover a faith in God so newly grounded that we need never again fear losing the cherished creatures we love. A radical faith, the daughter of dark times, finds the sun wherein all the loves we have had are illumined in the love that is light.

If fear is the last word in our love, we will communicate only fear to those we cherish. Such fear is a futile strain, as if we could walk, by our puny skills, on water. But fear faced and released in faith allows us to love the beloved more freely and the giver of the gift more authentically.

Saint Augustine observed that “The Gospel tells us how Christ the Lord walked upon the waters of the sea, and how the apostle Peter did the same until fear made him falter and lose confidence. Then he began to sink and emerged from the water only after calling on the Lord with renewed faith.

When we consider Peter as a representative member of the Church we should distinguish between what was due to God’s action in him and what was attributable to himself. Then we ourselves shall not falter; then we shall be founded upon rock and remain firm and unmoved in the face of the wind, rain, and floods, which are the trials and temptations of this present world.

Look at Peter, who in this episode is an image of ourselves; at one moment he is all confidence, at the next all uncertainty and doubt; now he professes faith in the immortal One, now he fears for his life.

‘Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you upon the water.’ When the Lord said ‘Come’ Peter climbed out of the boat and began to walk on the water. This is what he could do through the power of the Lord; what by himself? Realizing how violently the wind was blowing, he lost his nerve, and as he began to sink he called out, ’Lord, I am drowning, save me!’

When he counted on the Lord’s help it enabled him to walk on the water; when human frailty made him falter he turned once more to the Lord, who immediately stretched out his hand to help him, raised him up as he was sinking, and rebuked him for his lack of faith.

Think, then, of this world as a sea, whipped up to tempestuous heights by violent winds. A person’s own private tempest will be his or her unruly desires. If you love God you will have power to walk upon the waters, and all the world’s swell and turmoil will remain beneath your feet. But if you love the world it will surely engulf you, for it always devours its lovers, never sustains them.

If you feel your foot slipping beneath you, if you become a prey to doubt or realize that you are losing control, if, in a word, you begin to sink, say: ‘Lord, I am drowning, save me!’ Only he who for your sake died in your fallen nature can save you from the death inherent in that fallen nature.”

We are each called to have faith in Jesus. When our faith wavers and doubts set in we will feel as if we are sinking. Only when we place our trust in him and not in ourselves will we be able to walk on water.

Amen.

Homily for the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
1 Kings 19:9, 11-13
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:22-33

speaks to us in a still, small voice—a tiny whispering sound—which can only be heard from the heart.

God always responds to our prayers. He never ignores our pleas. It is we who look for answers in the wrong places. We close our hearts and minds waiting for God to respond directly and unequivocally to our desires. God seldom responds that way for He knows what is best for us and therefore gives us what we need the most rather than what we most desire.

We really must look ‘outside the box’ if we wish to hear God’s voice. God responds in echoes, reflections of sights and sounds, often obliquely and “indistinctly, as in a mirror.”

What all this means is that if we are to hear God’s voice we must overcome or set aside our innate human limitations and tune ourselves to His frequency and His light. When we were born we felt loved without understanding. We did not try to analyze or intellectualize what we felt because we had no means to do so just as we had neither the desire nor compulsion to go beyond the sense of well-being and nurturing love that surrounded us. We just felt loved and it was a good feeling.

So it is with God. In our humanity, our physical bodies, we cannot hear or see God but through our spirituality, our souls, we can reach out and hear His voice.

Too few, I fear, trust God enough to even think of asking what he has in mind for us. Perhaps we are simply too afraid to ask, believing we might find ourselves not of the same mind as his.

Perhaps we hold ourselves in such esteem that we find no need to question what we have reasoned and self-concluded to be our purpose and our lot in life.

Perhaps. But … then, why not seek further guidance, why not ask for validation, why not look at all the options? Why not consult with the Holy Spirit?

We forget too soon all we thought to be when we were young. No longer are we wont to do and be, well … everything. As we grow we circumscribe; like weeds, we toss away our childish dreams until we find our hearts conformed, well-tamed and harnessed to a simple plow. With blinders, we plod the straight and narrow row; unseen the paths which would yet beckon at the briefest interludes.

What God asks of every soul is seldom all the mind and heart conceives; for God calls each to reach beyond our own humanity, to be more than man or woman; God calls each to be a saint. We are called to holiness, we are called to Godliness, we are called to love and serve God.

Every soul is unique unto itself. Each has been created by God to its own purpose, to serve him in varied ways, through different vocations. Some may serve as clergy, many others may serve as laity, and some may further choose to consecrate their lives to serve God as either clergy or laity. How sad to limit one’s life to only what the self devises, never seeking to discover the gifts God has bestowed.

For most, God calls to serve as laity, “the animating principle of human society” (CCC § 899), being the face of Jesus to every encounter and using their God-given gifts for the good of all. Laypersons can be called to either married or single vocations. Married couples are called to be “fruitful and multiply,” to raise and form the children God may give them in the faith. Dedicated single persons are called to serve the human family.

Laity, whether married or single, serve in the common priesthood in so much as they offer their trials and blessings in sacrifice to God; they serve as prophets whenever they are the face of Christ to the world; and when they serve and care for the needs of others, they do so as royalty, serving in the kingship of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Those who are called to serve as clergy are few, too few in much of the world. There are three orders of clergy: the episcopate (bishops), the presbyterate (priests) and the diaconate (deacons). Each has a unique role, each is a unique vocation, yet all three are called to serve the Body of Christ and his Church by handing on the apostolic tradition.

Clergy serve in the priestly role when they celebrate the sacraments; they serve in the prophetic role when they proclaim and preach the Gospel at liturgy, and they serve as royalty when they care for the needs of others, especially the poor and vulnerable.

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Those who are called to consecrated life may be either clergy or laity. What distinguishes them is their voluntary acceptance of celibacy, poverty and obedience. “It is the profession of these counsels, within a permanent state of life recognized by the Church, that characterizes the life consecrated to God” (CCC § 915).

While many, if not most, of the men and women in consecrated life belong to religious orders such as the Dominicans or Franciscans, that is not always the case, as they may be members of a secular institution. Men can be brothers, monks, and priests. Women can be sisters, consecrated virgins, and widows. They often share in a particular apostolate such as working in schools, hospitals, or homeless shelters. No matter what area of service they choose, those in consecrated life devote their lives to following Jesus Christ, reminding all they encounter through their lives and service that this world is not our final destination.

Here, I wish to get personal. We are all called by God to holiness. Holiness is never easy; it is not meant to be easy, for as with all things in life, easy purchases nothing of value. The easy road leads to perdition, to hell. The hard road is what must be traveled to reach heaven.

A common refrain voiced by every man in our diaconate formation class was “why me? I am not worthy of this great honor.” Each of us recognized that we were sinners, broken, in need of forgiveness. Surely there were others who were better than we, yet, each had heard God’s call to serve him, each felt blessed and humbled by the call.

Like my fellow brothers in Christ, I have been blessed with multiple vocations, multiple opportunities to serve God as priest, prophet and king. Today I thank God for the many opportunities he has given me; it hasn’t always been so.

There are seven Sacraments. I have been blessed to have been the recipient of all seven. Two stand indelibly etched into the very core of my being, as a man, a husband, father, grandfather, and as deacon: the sacraments of Matrimony and Ordination. All seven are blessings from God; each provides gifts of grace to assist us on our journey to holiness and toward our heavenly home. Yet those two, above the others, ground me, fulfill me, make me whole.

God called. I listened. He sent an angel to watch over me, to guide me, to help me find the way to holiness. I have been blessed to have my angel beside me for nearly fifty years. Together, God has given us two daughters, one angel in heaven, and five grandchildren.

What more could one ask of God? What more could God ask of me? I thought I had it all: wife, children, grandchildren, careers. But God had more in store for me, much more. Thank you God!

Next month I will rejoice in six blessed years since ordination to the Permanent Diaconate. No words can express the gratitude and love I have for God in calling me to humbly serve him and his holy people. It is with love then that I say to you, “When God calls … listen to him. Listen to him.”

Deacon’s Diner
Food for a restless mind

For those restless minds that hunger and thirst for more. Each week this space will offer a menu of interesting and provocative titles, written by Catholic authors, in addition to those referenced in the articles, for you to feed your restless mind.

BOOKS

On Conscience
Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger
Ignatius Press
2007, 82 pages.

How the West Really Lost God
Mary Eberstadt
Templeton Press

Strangers in a Strange Land
Charles J. Chaput
Henry Holt and Co.

PERIODICALS

First Things
Institute on Religion and Public Life
Editor: R. R. Reno
Ten Issues per year.
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A Journal of Mere Christianity
Editor: James M. Kushiner
Bi-Monthly.
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www.catholic.com
Deacon Chuck Lanham is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.


Each issue of Colloquī can be viewed or downloaded from http://deaconscorner.org.

Deacon Chuck can be contacted thru email at deacon.chuck@deaconscorner.org

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