

Reflection on the Gospel of St. Luke

by Fr. Dominic Borg, OCD

Aridity, emptiness, desert, darkness, desolation, night - by which ever name it is described, the experience of God's "absence", or distance, or seeming inactivity, is unsettling in the spiritual life. It appears as an intruder, usually we cannot trace its origin to one particular point in our spiritual life. It evades explanation; our experience of prayer (or rather practice) may evidence no shifts or modifications which could warrant such an experience. It persists; we feel powerless in the face of this experience, with no apparent resource to displace it.

The experience of God's absence is most unsettling however, because it stands in such sharp contrast to those images which are frequently associated with a healthy relationship with the Lord - water, garden, light, consolation, day, etc. Underlying all of these image is the fundamental expectation of Presence. As Christians, we feel and believe that God is always present and active in our life. This is no mere fancy; it is an essential element of our faith and hope, it is rooted firmly in the promise of Jesus: "I will be with you always, to the end of time." (Matthew 28.20) But, as with any expectation, this one too is susceptible to distortion. We say we believe that God is ever present and active, but we may mean that we want God to be present and active in the way we think he should be or as we would like him to be. Such a distortion shifts the focus from God to ourselves and it dulls our awareness of the truth that "my thoughts are not like yours, and my ways are different from yours, says the Lord". (Isaiah 55.8). Confirming God's presence and activity to our self-created categories will only intensify an already unsettling experience. More than any theory for analyzing and categorizing and organizing the experience of God's absence, we need a perspective for understanding and approaching and living it.

"One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they pulled out, and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up, shouting, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased and there was calm. He said to them, "Where is your faith?" They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, "Who is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?" (Lk 8.22-25)

The experience of God's absence in our spiritual life can be parallel to the storm encountered by the disciples. Both came unexpectedly like a "strong wind" which concerns and even frightens us. Both bring an uncertainty which portends the collapse of our immediate situation, our little world. Both surround us with the sense that we are in "great danger". Both urge us to cry out: "Master, Master! We are about to die!"

Fortunately, the parallel does not end here. Just as he does with his disciples in the story, the Lord can reassure us of his presence and activity. It is a reassurance which restores peacefulness. With that reassurance, however, comes the Lord's penetrating question, "where is your faith?" The faith about which the Lord asks is described in the letters to the Hebrews as "surety of the things we hope for and certainty of the things we cannot see" (Heb 11.1). The same faith is described by St. John of the Cross as "the spirit which is incomprehensible to the senses." As we live out our relationship with the Lord, we want to sense his unchanging presence and sustaining activity within us. The experience of God's absence captivates our attention and blinds us to that presence and activity. Thus, only in faith lies certainty. Jesus himself declares that if you had faith the size of a mustard seed ... nothing would be impossible for you." (Mt 17.20)

The spiritual life can well be described as a journey "to the place where God is hidden", a journey "to go across to the other side of the lake". Whenever and however we accept the Lord's invitation to cross the lake, the crossing will be made in the boat of our own lives. That boat is constructed with our strengths and weaknesses, our successes and failures, and our efforts to love the Lord and others. It is equipped with our images of God and our expectations for his presence and activity. The lake on which we sail is the Lord's firm and irrevocable love for us, without measure, without reservation.

And so the crossing begins. With our images and expectations securely stowed on board, we anticipate only smooth sailing. We have made plans for this journey; in particular, we look forward to a familiarity and an intimacy with the Lord which will support and guide us throughout the crossing. We assume that nothing will go wrong; after all, the boat is sturdy and the lake is calm. And so the crossing continues. Once we have set sail, once we have established some discipline in our personal prayer, once we have experienced the Lord's presence and activity in our spiritual life, the Lord finds some comfortable spot in the boat and falls asleep. At first, we may not sense any change; eventually though, we notice that all is not as it was when the crossing began. Rather than a progressively developing relationship with the Lord, we sense nothing but the rising winds and the gathering clouds in a darkening sky. As our awareness sharpens, we seek to shorten the duration of this experience, we seek to lessen its impact on our established discipline of prayer and on our understanding of the Lord's work in our life.

Still, the winds grow disturbingly stronger and the clouds become increasingly ominous. The Lord seems ever more distant, even absent. We seem to be losing control of our boat and it occurs to us that this entire voyage could end in disaster. "The disciples went to Jesus and woke him up saying, "Master, Master! We are about to die!" The Lord does indeed provide. He does not abandon us. Whatever our perceptions may be, we are not, in fact, left alone in the boat. Regardless of what our senses may tell us, the Lord is with us always. He wakes from his sleep and he reassures us. But, in direct challenge to our perceptions and senses, he asks us: "Where is your faith?"

The wisdom of this gospel story about Jesus sleeping in the boat can support and strengthen faith. Throughout the history of Christianity, spiritual writers have noted that there are times in our relationship with the Lord when his presence and activity are less recognizable, less sensible. The knowledge of that fact does not and cannot replace faith. Quite the contrary, it requires faith. Knowledge alone can never probe completely the many experiences through which the spiritual life takes us. This is true most especially within the experience of God's absence. However much we may "know" about that experience, only faith provides the assurance of those "things we cannot see", only faith enables us to acknowledge God's presence and activity. Faith is the perspective from which we must view and understand our experiences in the spiritual life. Apart from faith, we tend to equate the Lord's work in our life with our own sensible awareness and recognition of it.

Faith is the means by which we make the crossing to the other side of the lake. We can and do bring all of our images and expectations on the voyage. But in and of themselves, no images or expectations have the stamina to sustain us throughout the journey. Faith alone equips us with a peacefulness and an acceptance which our images and expectations are incapable of supplying. Faith brings peacefulness even in the midst of the threatening winds and the turbulent waters that we encounter occasionally in our spiritual life. St. Paul describes this well as "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding". (Phil 4.7) Faith brings acceptance even when we are confronted with the experience of God's absence.

St. Therese of Lisieux, like St. John of the Cross, know well the experience of God's absence. In fact she applies the imagery of the Gospel story to her description of the aridity and abandonment which characterized the retreat prior to her first profession. "It was far from bringing me any consolations since the most absolute aridity and abandonment were my lot, Jesus was sleeping as usual in my little boat; ah! I see very well how rarely souls allow him to sleep peacefully within them. Jesus is so fatigued with always having to take the initiative and to attend to others that he hastens to take advantage of the repose I offer to him."

We "rarely allow" the Lord to sleep because such an approach seems so incongruous with our images of and expectations for our relationship with the Lord. And yet, Therese speaks of the Lord's sleep as something which is his presence. Has the Lord abandoned us? Are we left to drift alone? Faith provides the perspective. Faith challenges us to "allow the Lord to sleep peacefully within us". Faith challenges us to embrace the privilege to have the Lord fall asleep in the boat of our life. Faith challenges us to trust that the Lord will awaken and disembark us on the other side of the lake, where his promises are fulfilled, where his kingdom awaits us. Courage my brothers and sisters, let us cross with the Lord to the other side.