



Christ's Ship on the Sea of Galilee, a Picture of the Church of Our Times

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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Grace be with you, mercy and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ Jesus.

Reading the history of the Christian Church, we find that men think the church is always in great danger of being annihilated; yet it has always regained its strength.

How small Christ's Church was when he left the world after His work of redemption!

It consisted of no more than a few hundred souls, and most were poor simple folk. Even the twelve apostles were uneducated, timid men; through the preaching of the Gospel they of all people were to spread the Christian Church throughout the whole world. This appeared to be wholly impossible. But what happened? Miraculously equipped on the first Pentecost with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they went out into all the world to preach the Gospel to every creature; after no more than about thirty years Paul, who himself became a Christian after being a persecutor, could report to the Colossians that the Gospel was "preached to every creature which is under heaven." (Col 1:23). A few years later he could write to Timothy, "God was manifest in the flesh, ... preached unto the gentiles, believed on in the world," I Timothy 3:16. When all the apostles had died, the Christian Church had already spread over the whole world; there were Christian congregations in all the lands of the world.

If the Christian Church was *founded* during the bloody persecutions by the Jews and heathen, these persecutions really first began after it *had* been founded; the more numerous Christians became, the

more the worldly rulers feared that the Christians could become dangerous. Hence, they and particularly the Roman emperor decided to wipe out the Christian Church. The Roman emperors and their officials used every imaginable device to torture the Christians, in order to cause them to deny Christ and thus exterminate the Christian Church.

They did not only behead, drown, strangle, and burn Christians but also dreamed up every possible way to make their death especially frightful and painful. Christians became food for wild animals; they were roasted slowly over a fire, smothered in sewers, crucified head down and ravening animals were allowed to gnaw at them, killed by thirst; the heathen tore off little by little every piece of flesh from their bones with shells or white hot tongs; they poured boiling oil and pitch into their mouths; they tied their naked bodies to corpses, threw both into dark and stinking pits, and let them die of hunger and rot with the corpses. In the first three centuries many hundreds of thousands of Christians were killed. When the persecution of Emperor Diocletian and his coregents ended in the year 310, they issued as a remembrance of their victory over the Christians edicts with the superscription, "After wiping out the name Christians who wanted to overthrow the kingdom," or, "After the complete extermination of the Christian heresy everywhere."

But was this proud superscription really true? No! Just before a Church father had written, "The more you cut us down the more we increase. The blood of the Christian is a seed." Yes, the church historian Eusebius writes, "The very swords at last became dull and broke in pieces as though worn out; the hangmen became tired and had to relieve one another; but the Christians began to sing songs of praise and thanks until their last breath to the honor of almighty God."

All the persecutors died a frightful death. The last such, Emperor Galerius, his body rotting with inexpressible pains, feeling God's wrath, published in the year 311 another edict. He declared that his intention of bringing the Christians back to the religion of their fathers was not attained, and they themselves were only hindered in the worship of their own gods. They should therefore be tolerated and now pray to their God for the welfare of the kingdom and their emperor.

When this fanatic had died and Emperor Constantine became a Christian himself in the year 323, the Christians with but brief interruptions enjoyed complete rest from persecution. But now even more dangerous enemies, false teachers, arose in their own midst; they did not seek the temporal life of the Church but the truth on which it was founded and thus slay it spiritually. But see! no matter how many heretics arose, God always awakened men who exposed the heresy and defended the truth.

The Church faced even greater danger through the rise of the papacy. It seemed to have become a worldly kingdom of priests, Christ pushed from his throne, the saving Gospel done away with, and thus the Church surely wrecked. Even the earlier bloody persecutions arose again, and now *in the midst of the Church herself*. But lo! just when all help seemed to be gone, it was at the door. God awakened Dr. Martin Luther who carried out the work of a complete reformation of the Church.

Alas, today the Christian Church again lies in the dust. It is true that hundreds of millions of men still are Christian in name, but they are either unbelievers who laugh at the mysteries of the Christian religion, or they are the sects who cling to comfortless human doctrines. The true Christians who stand in the true faith are only a very small flock. The enemy of the Church again

triumphs and predicts in a thousand writings that the Christian Church will soon be completely wiped out.

What now? Do we have reason to fear that the Church will at last perish? No, no! My friends! According to God's Word this is absolutely impossible. Today's Gospel guarantees that no matter how severely the storms may rage now, Christ's little ship will not be wrecked. Let us now hear and consider this Gospel for the purpose of strengthening us in this belief.

Scripture text: Matthew 8:23-27. *And when he was entered into a ship, his disciples followed him. And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves; but he was asleep. And his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish. And he saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. But the men marvelled, saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him!*

On the basis of this text let the subject of today's consideration be

CHRIST'S SHIP ON THE SEA OF GALILEE, A PICTURE OF THE CHURCH OF OUR TIMES.

1. A Picture of the Dangers in Which it Hovers,
2. A Picture of the Members it Has,
3. A Picture of the Protection Under Which it Stands.

[1. A Picture of the Dangers in Which it Hovers]

The day on which the event related in our text took place was the same day in which Christ had miraculously healed the leper and the servant of the centurion at Capernaum. That we heard in the Gospel of last Sunday. This had been a day of especially hard work. Matthew tells us that Christ that same day healed not only Peter's mother-in-law, but in addition whole crowds of possessed and sick. Evening finally came and many people still crowded around him; perhaps they merely wished to see still more miracles; he therefore commanded his disciples to prepare ship for a trip to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Whereupon we read in our text, "*And when he entered into a ship, his disciples followed him.*" (v 23).

In any case, the ship was no palatial merchantman, but one of Peter's small simple fishing boats. No vessel had ever carried a more precious cargo than this little boat. It carried something more precious than all the gold, pearls, and precious stones in the world. It bore the Savior of the world and the twelve apostles who were to carry the message of salvation into all the world. It carried the Lord of the Church himself and its twelve pillars. One can indeed say that had this ship sunk the Church would have gone down and the whole world would have been lost.

Now one would have supposed that if any ship would have had smooth sailing then this would have been the one. But what do we hear? We read in our text, "*And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves.*" (v 24).

"And, behold," the evangelist writes. With this little word he shows that something which no one expected suddenly arose. When the ship had thrust from land, the evening sky was clear and bright. Wind and sea were calm, but behold, scarcely had they reached the high seas than suddenly, as we read in our text, "*a great tempest*" arose "*in the sea.*" As we see from the original text, this "*storm*" was a swell which came from the lake bottom as would arise from an earthquake. The sea suddenly swelled and created waves which, rising and falling rapidly, lifted the ship like a ball, now to giddy heights, now hurling it down into the trough. Mark adds that also a "great storm of wind" or a hurricane was added to the "*swell*" from the depths of the sea. It seized the little ship and spun it like a top. Sky, wind, and sea seemed to have rebelled.

The result was that the waves not only smote the ship but, as our text says, "*the ship was covered with the waves.*" Covered by the sea, it appeared to be about to sink. All human help, strength, and wisdom was helpless. Even those in the ship, fishermen familiar with the sea, who certainly had passed through many a dangerous storm, now feared for their lives.

And what was the most frightening, we read that Christ the Lord, in whose presence the disciples otherwise feared nothing, "*was asleep.*" He seemed neither to know of nor care about the danger in which his disciples were. Yes, Mark informs us that he lay on a pillow near the helmsman. Christ seemed to be the reason why the ship was in this danger. Only one push -- and ship and crew would sink into the depths of the sea.

What does our text vividly picture to us? Nothing else than the great danger in which the ship of the Christian Church is at all times, especially in our day. Like a ship the Church sails from country to country on the sea of time. Christ is the captain. The preachers of the Gospel are the helmsmen. Faith with baptism is the ship's gangplank, hope its anchor, the cross its mast. The word is the sails; the wind which swells these sails is the Holy Ghost, its flag the creed, the Christians compose the crew, and the harbor toward which the ship sails is heaven.

What happened to this ship of the Church? It had no sooner quietly weighed anchor at the time of the apostles and sailed upon the world, when behold there arose a swell from beneath and a hurricane from above. Hell, world, and heaven itself seemed to have conspired against the ship of the Church and resolved to destroy it. Then the swell of bloody persecution raged.

Now the hurricane of false doctrine.

If the ship of the Church *always* was in danger of running aground, shattering, and sinking, it is really the case *today*. It is true we today do not groan under the cruel rod of persecution. Yes, God be eternally praised we here in America enjoy a degree of religious freedom which God has scarcely granted any other land. Nevertheless, here the ship of the Church hovers in greater danger.

Our America is not only the land of the sects who preach their false faith everywhere with great show of being the only true saving faith, but also the very enemies of Christ and his Church are here in great power. Unless God prevents it they can, after they are in power, take our freedom from us. In many newspapers and other periodicals they rail at everything holy. They organize secret societies into which they draw the unsuspecting, but from whom they hide their plans. They beguile more and more with their sweet talk of light, enlightenment, progress, and freedom.

Truly, the ship of the church is again in great trouble. The spirit of the times like a hurricane sometimes lifts it up to giddy heights and sometimes pulls it down into frightful depths. Countless baptized Christians have already fallen away and daily more follow. And what is most frightening, Christ seems again to sleep and watch peacefully how the storm tears the sail of the Word and the flag of the creed into tatters, snaps the mast of the cross, and covers the ship of the Church with the waves of sin and unbelief.

[2. A Picture of the Members it Has]

Christ's ship in the storm on the Sea of Galilee pictures not only the dangers in which the Church now hovers, but secondly the members it has.

We read in our text, "*And his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us; we perish.*" (v 25). This tells us two facts about the disciples. First, that they truly believed, but secondly, that their faith was extremely weak. They had forsaken the whole world and its enticing splendor to follow Christ even into the ship on the sea. And when great trouble and danger befell them and human aid was of no avail, they did not doubt but turned to Christ, awakened him, and offered this ardent prayer to him, "*Lord, save us!*" Had they not believed that Christ was the almighty Son of God, they would not have turned to Him, when only an experienced seaman would know what to do.

Nevertheless their faith was weak. Had it been a strong faith, they would have thought of Christ's many miracles which they had witnessed. In the middle of the storm they would have, after their prayer for help, certain of an answer, joined in a song of praise and thanksgiving. There would be no room in their hearts for the faintest suggestion of the thought that their ship would sink. With David they would have thought, "Yea, though I walk through the dark valley of mountain high waves, I will fear no evil, for the Lord is with me."

But what did they do? It is true they pray in faith, "*Lord, save us!*" But full of anxiety and fear they immediately add, "*We perish!*" Yes, Mark tells us that several even cried out, "Master, carest thou not that we perish?" (4:38). We see from this that their faith was very weak and no doubt bordered on unbelief. It was no more than a smoking flax and a bruised reed. Hence, Christ did not reject them but rebuked them saying, "*Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?*" (v 26a).

This is the picture of the membership of the Church. There still are, praise God! people who have left the enticing world, cling to Christ, confess that he is God's Son, and, in their troubles in true faith call on him, "*Lord, save us!*" even when man is helpless. Alas, the age of the strong in faith, the heroes of faith, as we repeatedly meet them by name in the first 300 years and in the time of the Reformation, is past. The believers of our times are almost without exception weak and small of faith. Very much smaller storms than the storm on the Sea of Galilee, much weaker attacks and temptations now cause Christians to waver and totter. If a bloody persecution would break out today and Christians were no firmer in their faith than they are now, most would deny the faith and fall away.

Now, my very dear friends, does not this present a sad, hopeless prospect? Must we not fear that the Church will go under after all? Must we not expect that in the last times of the Church increasingly greater troubles, attacks, and temptations are near? Yes, we must expect the latter; but we do not have to fear that for this reason the Church will perish. Christ does not reject even the weak in faith, put out the smoking flax, nor break the bruised reed. For the ship of Christ upon the Sea of Galilee

is not only a picture of the dangers in which it hovers, and the weakness of its members, but also the protection under which it stands. And it is of this which I speak to you now.

[3. A Picture of the Protection Under Which it Stands]

It is true that Christ slept while the disciples were in the greatest danger. It seemed as if Christ neither knew of the danger to his disciples nor cared. Yet it only seemed so. Christ did actually sleep but only as a true man. Even then He was and remained the Keeper of Israel who does not slumber and sleep, for according to His divinity He watched; He saw everything which took place, and took care that in spite of the storm and waves the ship did not become wrecked while He slept. To the disciples He seemed to sleep, only to tempt and test them, to strengthen their faith through temptation, and to make them pray. When Christ was therefore awakened by the disciples' cry for help, he fearlessly let the storm rage on for a while and first of all stilled the storm in the hearts of the disciples. "*Then,*" we read, "*he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.*" (v 26b.)

This was an incomprehensible miracle. At times it happens in a natural manner that a hurricane on the sea suddenly stilled. But then the waves would rise for a longer time and only gradually diminish after the wind had been calm for a long time. But Mark tells us, as soon as Christ had said to the wind and sea, "Peace, be still!" both were immediately and absolutely quiet. The howling winds and the raging sea quieted. It became a glassy surface in which the evening sky quietly reflected the glittering stars; the ship cried out in amazement, "*What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?*" (v 27).

Here we have the last picture of the Church of our times. It is an inexpressibly comforting one. We see that though the Church may be like Christ's ship on the Sea of Galilee, though the whole world with all its mighty and wise may surprise the Church like a sea whipped by the wind, though its sinking may seem to be inevitable, though it may seem as if Christ is asleep again at the helm and his Word the hindrance to the only possible deliverance of the Church, though the very members of the Church seem to be ever so faint-hearted today and in despair cry out, "*Lord, save us; we perish!*" yes, though many today desperately jump out of the ship into the sea of the world, we nevertheless have no reason to fear and despair. Christ is in our ship, and He does not sleep according to His divine omniscience, omnipotence, and care. When His hour is come, he will arise, chide our faint-heartedness, and say to the world, "*Peace, be still.*" It will then become absolutely quiet and in triumph the ship of the Church will sail into the harbor of heaven.

Christ has promised, "On this rock (he means himself) I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18). "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." (Matthew 28:20).

Oh, therefore, do not despair, even in these last troublesome times. Do not leave the ship of the Church, because you think it will soon go down. Otherwise you will regret it eternally, because outside this ship is no salvation, as once outside Noah's ark there was no deliverance. And as Noah's ark sailed successfully over the waves of the flood and finally, safe and sound, landed on the mountains of Ararat, so will also the ship of the Church sail safely over the stormy sea of the world and land on the eternal mountains of divine grace. There if you have remained in the faith you will also in amazement cry out, "*What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?*" and will eternally rejoice. For

*The Word they still shall let remain
Nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain
With his good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Let these all be gone,
They yet have nothing won;
The kingdom ours remaineth. Amen.
(TLH 262, st. 4)*