

Year B Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 21, 2009
Jb 38:1, 8-11; Ps 107; 2 Cor 5:14-17; Mk 4:35-41

The salient image this Sunday is that of the storm. In the ancient Near East, God's omnipotence was manifested in natural phenomena, especially the storm. This was especially true of the Ugaritic culture, that is, the settlers of the land of Canaan before Israel arrived, but from whose highly developed mythico-religious stock they borrowed heavily. Of Ps 29, LaSalle Brother Aloysius Fitzgerald, a leading Hebrew scholar at Catholic University of America, said that if the Canaanite fertility/rain/storm god "Ba'al" were substituted for "Yahweh," the poem's alliteration and assonance would improve; in other words, here Israel may have taken over what was previously a hymn to the storm god Ba'al. Yahweh's Spirit tamed the waters of the deep at creation, Gn 1, and God's manifestation ("theophany") at Sinai was in terms of tempest, Ex 19:16-19, something denied later to Elijah on the same mountain, 1 Kgs 19:9-13. The sea was the realm of chaos and demonic monsters; Is 51:9-11 is an urgent plea to Yahweh "wake up" and repeat in the End time what he did in the beginning, "dry up Sea and the Deep" (the Hebrew words here evoke older mythological personifications of these natural forces). Other passages where God tames or rebukes the sea are Ps 106:9; Is 17:12-13 (here the enemy nations are said to thunder and roar); Ps 104:5-7; Ps 18:7-18, cf. 2 Sm 22:16.

In Mk 1:25, Jesus, who had come 'to destroy evil spirits,' rebuked the demoniac and commanded him to "be muzzled." In our Gospel reading, Jesus, awakened like Yahweh in Is 51:9, rebuked (same word as in the Greek of Ps 106:9) the sea and commanded it, too, to "be muzzled." Jesus has brought a "new teaching," a new revelation which is definitive salvation from God: it is literally defined in Mk 1:27 as "he commands the unclean spirits and they obey him."

The ancient storm-god imagery used in the Old Testament to evoke with poetic forcefulness the awesome might of our creator Lord finds in the meek and gentle Jesus a concrete embodiment we can relate to intimately. It is Jesus who gives us rest from the storms of life, We enter into this rest through our faith, Heb 4:3, through which we are refreshed (Acts 3:20) and become new creatures, though we struggle against disobedience, for our great Sabbath rest remains ahead, Heb 4:9-11.