

May I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Have you ever found yourself out of your depth and almost embarrassed that you were driven to ask for God's help to get you out of the consequences of your own stupidity?

I certainly have!

I suspect I'm not the only one who used the lockdown as an excuse to get fitter. Do you know the start of the hundred and twenty-first psalm? "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh even from the Lord." Well, that was my motto of the lockdown; in a small terraced house in Belfast's inner-city with my parents, it was a case of either turning to the hills that surround the city or turning to drink. If the truth be told, there might have been a bit of both.

Still, on the first Saturday of the lockdown I surprised myself by tackling the highest of the Belfast Hills, a four hundred and eighty metre monster called Divis, in one go, six miles walk from home which is near the docklands and sea level. I was very proud of myself. But I hadn't really got my mountain legs at this point, and I didn't relish the circuitous walk back down. A quick scan of aerial photos on Google Maps showed that at one point it was barely four hundred metres from a formal path to the tarmacked city streets below, from where it would be an easy three mile stroll back. I knew the hill was steep at this point, as its slopes are visible across the city, but from below it always looked like a manageable scramble across some very pretty, gorse-bedecked, fields. My father, who grew up in the estate immediately below that hill, has long regaled me with stories of a childhood spent playing up on that mountain. When I clambered naughtily over the fence to start my short-cut, I had to admit it looked steeper than it seemed from a distance. Much steeper. But you know, four hundred metres, four football fields, how hard could it be?

Well at the Olympics a few years ago, Wayde van Niekirk ran four hundred metres in forty-three seconds. I took an hour, and it seemed like a century. From a distance, you don't see the little gorges that millennia of rain have cut into the hillside, or how sharply the gorse bushes cut into you when you slide down a particularly steep section. Nor do you see what happens when you finally get onto slightly flatter ground, which in March has been turned into a bog. I shouted many prayers on the way down that hillside, most of all that I might be spared the humiliation of a mountain rescue and perhaps even a trip to hospital, pilloried on the local radio news as the sort of COVIDIOT who wastes police and NHS resources that are badly needed elsewhere. But no prayer was more fervently uttered than the one on that flatland, with the merciful relief of a pavement just a hole in the hedge away, when one of my walking shoes got stuck fast in the mud, and I had to scoop mounds of dirty, sulphurous, muck with my hands to retrieve it. I felt irresponsible, and juvenile, and stupid, and absolutely desperate for God to hear my prayers, even in the middle of a global pandemic when He surely had more deserving cases to think about.

Perhaps St Peter felt a bit like that when he suddenly realised that just because Jesus could walk on water it didn't mean that he could; when he began to sink, humiliatingly, into the Sea of Galilee, in front of the band of brothers who looked to him as something of a leader, in front of Jesus whom he adored. Jesus' reply must have made the embarrassment worse – didn't Peter even trust him?

Matthew's Gospel makes Peter even more of a central character than the others do – it is in Matthew alone, for example, that Christ promises Peter the power to bind and loose, in heaven and on earth. There has long been speculation that the Gospel was compiled by a community associated with Peter, probably one that had to flee Jerusalem as a result of persecution and found it needed to translate stories that had long been told in Aramaic into Greek. To this community Peter, almost certainly dead by the time the Gospel was written, must have been in the process of becoming a legend. Yet that didn't stop him being taken down a peg or two, repeatedly, in the stories of Matthew's Gospel. We can imagine him at the table after the weekly celebrations of the Lord's Supper, telling these stories against himself and laughing at his own stupidity, his own failure to understand what Jesus was actually trying to show him.

Yet this is the rock on which Christ built his church! Our Lord did not call us to follow him because we particularly clever, or particularly wise, and certainly not because we are perfect. Peter made many mistakes, had many flaws. We know all about that ourselves. So any critique of the society around us, made by us as the Church, needs to be made in humility, as a body of people who have made many mistakes.

Yet, I wonder if humanity has been attempting to walk on water for the last couple of centuries or so, times that also saw us losing of our sense of dependence on God. We have assumed that our human nature could be managed or even transformed by the right ideas, advancing technology, or the correct suite of government policies. We have forgotten that what we are as human beings is God-given, and God in his wisdom knew far more about making humanity flourish than we do. We see our inability to understand ourselves, and our correct place in the created order, most clearly in the ecological crisis that is afflicting the planet, which Pope Francis argues is as much a spiritual crisis as anything else. We might see it also in our epidemic of loneliness, and the burden of mental health problems that seem to be hitting the young with particular force. We have plenty of material things; we have fathomless depths of entertainment available at the touch of a button; we are spared diseases and disabilities that were part of life for all of humanity's existence; and we have extraordinary freedom of thought and lifestyle choice. Yet here we are, lonely, full of hatred for those who differ from us, in danger of rendering our planet uninhabitable because of our endless desire for more, and for the fourth generation living with the reality that we could all be wiped out by a split-second decision by one of the world's great powers. Like Peter, rock of the Church, we are out of our depth.

Will we have the courage to stretch our hand like Peter, and call on Christ to save us? What would He tell us if we did?

The storm passes. Afterwards comes the silence; in the silence the disciples are on the now peaceful lake, under the majestic stars, worshipping Jesus, the Son of God.

Silence accompanied the presence of the Lord in our Old Testament reading. Elijah was zealous for the Lord in a land that was going to the dogs because it had abandoned faith in Him. He refused to be silent in the face of such wrong-headedness and found himself having to flee, a political and religious refugee. Hating his own incompetence and failure, he asked God to let him die. Instead, he was told to look to the hills for help from the Lord. Camped overnight on Mount Horeb, there was a storm; Elijah didn't hear God's voice in the storm, nor in the earthquake and fire that followed, but in the deep, deep, silence after they passed. In a world that is getting stormier, literally and figuratively, perhaps we need to give ourselves the space to hear God's voice in the silence that is so hard to find. We might find, isolated on a metaphorical mountaintop, that God has already given us the answers; that perhaps like the régime of Ahab and Jezebel that Elijah fought with, we just don't want to hear them.

Perhaps we need to stop trying to walk on water and instead admit, humbly, that we are out of our depth, to ask Christ to save us and then to hear that he already has; and in silence and in worship recommit ourselves to obedience to His ways, which are ways of justice and of peace and of truth, ways that have already been set out clearly for us.

And now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, and power, as is most justly His due, now and forever. Amen.