

John: 6:15–21

From Catena Aurea:

15. When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.

16. And when even was now come, his disciples went down unto the sea,

17. And entered into a ship, and went over the sea toward Capernaum. And it was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them.

18. And the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew.

19. So when they had rowed about five and twenty or thirty furlongs, they see Jesus walking on the sea, and drawing nigh unto the ship: and they were afraid.

20. But he saith unto them, It is I; be not afraid.

21. Then they willingly received him into the ship: and immediately the ship was at the land whither they went.

AUGUSTINE. (de Con. Ev. ii. c. xlvi) This is not at all inconsistent with what we read, that He went up into a mountain apart to pray: (Mat. 14:23) the object of escape being quite compatible with that of prayer. Indeed our Lord teaches us here, that whenever escape is necessary, there is great necessity for prayer.

AUGUSTINE. (Tr. xxv. 2) Yet He who feared to be made a king, was a king; not made king by men, (for He ever reigneth with the Father, in that He is the Son of God,) but making men kings: which kingdom of His the Prophets had foretold. Christ by being made man, made the believers in Him Christians, i. e. members of His kingdom, incorporated and purchased by His Word. And this kingdom will be made manifest, after the judgment; when the brightness of His saints shall be revealed. The disciples however, and the multitude who believed on Him, thought that He had come to reign now; and so would have taken Him by force, to make Him a king, wishing to anticipate His time, which He kept secret.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. xlii. 3) See what the belly can do. They care no more for the violation of the Sabbath; all their zeal for God is fled, now that their bellies are filled: Christ has become a Prophet, and they wish

to enthrone Him as king. But Christ makes His escape; to teach us to despise the dignities of the world. He dismisses His disciples, and goes up into the mountain.— (Hom. xliii. 1). These, when their Master had left them, went down in the evening to the sea; as we read; And when even was now come, His disciples went down unto the sea. They waited till evening, thinking He would come to them; and then, as He did not come, delayed no longer searching for Him, but in the ardour of love, entered into a ship, and went over the sea toward Capernaum. They went to Capernaum thinking they should find Him there.

AUGUSTINE. (Tr. xxv. s. 5) The Evangelist now returns to explain why they went, and relate what happened to them while they were crossing the lake: And it was dark, he says, and Jesus was not come to them.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. xlii. 1) The mention of the time is not accidental, but meant to shew the strength of their love. They did not make excuses, and say, It is evening now, and night is coming on, but in the warmth of their love went into the ship. And now many things alarm them: the time, And it was now dark; and the weather, as we read next, And the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew; their distance from land, So when they had rowed about five and twenty or thirty furlongs.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. xliii. 1) And at last He appears quite unexpectedly: They see Jesus walking upon the sea, drawing nigh. He reappears after His retirement, teaching them what it is to be forsaken, and stirring them to greater love; His reappearance manifesting His power. They were disturbed, were afraid, it is said. Our Lord comforts them: But He saith unto them, It is I, be not afraid.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. xliii. s. 1) He appeared to them in this way, to shew His power; for He immediately calmed the tempest: Then they wished to receive Him into the ship; and immediately the ship was at the land, whither they went. So great was the calm, He did not even enter the ship, in order to work a greater miracle, and to shew his Divinity more clearly.

THEOPHYLACT. Observe the three miracles here; the first, His walking on the sea; the second, His stilling the waves; the third, His putting them immediately on shore, which they were some distance off, when our Lord appeared.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. xliii. 1) Jesus does not shew Himself to the crowd walking on the sea, such a miracle being too much for them to hear. Nor even to the disciples did He shew Himself long, but disappeared immediately.

AUGUSTINE. Mark's account does not contradict this. He says indeed that our Lord told the disciples first to enter the ship, and go before Him over the sea, while He dismissed the crowds, and that when the

crowd was dismissed, He went up alone into the mountain to pray: while John places His going up alone in the mountain first, and then says, And when even was now come, His disciples went down unto the sea. But it is easy to see that John relates that as done afterwards by the disciples, which our Lord had ordered before His departure to the mountain.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. xliii. 1) Or take another explanation. This miracle seems to me to be a different one, from the one given in Matthew: for there they do not receive Him into the ship immediately, whereas here they do: and there the storm lasts for some time, whereas here as soon as He speaks, there is a calm. He often repeats the same miracle in order to impress it on men's minds.

AUGUSTINE. (Tr. xxv. s. 3. et seq.) There is a mystical meaning in our Lord's feeding the multitude, and ascending the mountain: for thus was it prophesied of Him, So shall the congregation of the people come about Thee: for their sake therefore lift up Thyself again: (Ps. 7) i. e. that the congregation of the people may come about Thee, lift up Thyself again. But why is it fled; for they could not have detained Him against His will? This fleeing has a meaning; viz. that His flight is above our comprehension; just as, when you do not understand a thing, you say, It escapes me. He fled alone unto the mountain, because He is ascended from above all heavens. But on His ascension aloft a storm came upon the disciples in the ship, i. e. the Church, and it became dark, the light, i. e. Jesus, having gone. As the end of the world draws nigh, error increases, iniquity abounds. Light again is love, according to John, He that hateth his brother is in darkness. (1 John 2:9) The waves and storms and winds then that agitate the ship, are the clamours of the evil speaking, and love waxing cold. Howbeit the wind, and storm, and waves, and darkness were not able to stop, and sink the vessel; For he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved. (Matt. 10:22) As the number five has reference to the Law, the books of Moses being five, the number five and twenty, being made up of five pieces, has the same meaning. And this law was imperfect, before the Gospel came. Now the number of perfection is six, so therefore five is multiplied by six, which makes thirty: i. e. the law is fulfilled by the Gospel. To those then who fulfil the law Jesus comes treading on the waves, i. e. trampling under foot all the swellings of the world, all the loftiness of men: and yet such tribulations remain, that even they who believe on Jesus, fear lest they should be lost.

THEOPHYLACT. When either men or devils try to terrify us, let us hear Christ saying, It is I, be not afraid, i. e. I am ever near you, God unchangeable, immoveable; let not any false fears destroy your faith in Me. Observe too our Lord did not come when the danger was beginning, but when it was ending. He suffers us to remain in the midst of dangers and tribulations, that we may be proved thereby, and flee for succour to Him Who is able to give us deliverance when we least expect it. When man's understanding can no

longer help him, then the Divine deliverance comes. If we are willing also to receive Christ into the ship, i. e. to live in our hearts, we shall find ourselves immediately in the place, where we wish to be, i. e. heaven.

From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:

6:15 They Attempt to Force Kingship

Christ Despised Worldly Dignity.

Chrysostom: Wonderful! How great is the tyranny of gluttony, how great the fickleness of people's minds! No longer do they vindicate the law, no longer do they care for the violation of the sabbath, and no longer are they zealous for God. All such considerations are thrown aside when their bellies have been filled. He was a prophet in their eyes, and they were about to choose him for a king. But Christ flees. Why? To teach us to despise worldly dignities and to show us that he needed nothing on earth. For the one who chose all the ordinary things of life, such as mother, house, city, nurture and clothing, would not afterwards be made illustrious by things on earth. Homilies on the Gospel of John 42.3.

He Is Already a King.

Augustine: Yet he who shrank from being made a king, was a king [already]; not made king by people but one who would bestow a kingdom on people.... For he ever reigns with the Father, in that he is the Son of God, the Word of God, the Word by which all things were made. The prophets had foretold his kingdom. Christ, by being made man, made the believers in him Christians. There will consequently be a kingdom of Christians that at present is being gathered together, being prepared and purchased by the blood of Christ. And this kingdom will be made manifest after the judgment when the glory of his saints shall be revealed.... The disciples, however, and the multitude who believed in him thought that he had come to reign immediately, and so they would have taken him by force to make him a king, seeking to anticipate his time, which he kept secret. Tractates on the Gospel of John 25.2.

Flee from Worldly Glory.

Cyril of Alexandria: When Christ flees from those who want to give him honor and refuses that highest earthly prize of a kingdom, ... he teaches us that it is unseemly for those who pursue divine grace and

thirst for everlasting glory to seek after worldly greatness. We must then forego the love of glory, the sister and neighbor of arrogance, residing not far from its borders. Let us have nothing to do with illustrious honor in this present life which is hurtful. Let us rather seek after a holy humility giving preference to one another. Commentary on the Gospel of John 3.4.

Our Power Is Not Political Power but Weakness.

Ambrose: Under the Old Testament, imperial power was bestowed by priests, not despotically claimed, and it is commonly said that emperors aspired to the priesthood rather than priests to the imperial power. Christ fled lest he be made a king. We have a power of our own. The power of the priest is weakness. He [Paul] said, "When I am weak, then I am strong." Letter 60 (to Marcellina).

Whenever Escape Is Necessary, So Is Prayer.

Augustine: Indeed our Lord teaches us here that whenever escape is necessary, there is an even greater necessity for prayer. Harmony of the Gospels 2.47.100.

6:16 At Evening, Jesus' Disciples Went to the Sea

John Records the Disciples' Action.

Augustine: There is no inconsistency between Matthew and John. Matthew has told us first how Jesus commanded his disciples to embark in the little ship and to go before him to the other side of the lake until he sent the multitudes away, and then he informs us that after the multitudes were sent away [Jesus] went up into a mountain alone to pray. John mentions first that he departed to a mountain alone and then proceeds to say, "And when it became late, his disciples came down to the sea; and when they had entered into a ship, etc." For who will not perceive that in recapitulating the facts, John has spoken of something as actually done at a later point by the disciples that Jesus had already charged them to do before his own departure to the mountain? Harmony of the Gospels 2.47.100.

Two Different Accounts?

Chrysostom: This miracle seems to me to be a different one from the one given in Matthew, and that it is different is clear for many reasons since he often repeats the same miracle in order to impress it on people's minds and to receive them with great faith.... There they do not receive him into the ship

immediately, and here they do. Also, there the storm lasts for some time, whereas here as soon as he speaks, there is a calm. Homilies on the Gospel of John 43.1.

Jesus Diffuses Speculation of Kingship.

Cyril of Alexandria: In order, then, that he might seem to have sailed away and thus diffuse the intensity of those who were looking for him, he orders the disciples to leave before him; but he stays, providing the opportunity for the next miracle. For his primary concern was to use every occasion to confirm the mind of the apostles in their faith toward him.... And so, when evening came and enough time had passed so that those who were seeking him gave up, the choir of holy disciples goes down to the sea and began to sail away immediately, obeying their God and teacher in everything without delay. Commentary on the Gospel of John 3.4.

6:17–18 Jesus Was Not with Them

The Danger of Being without Jesus in a Storm.

Cyril of Alexandria: The circumstances of their journey drive the disciples to a more intense search for the Savior. For the deep darkness of the night troubles them, hovering like smoke on the raging waves and taking away any ability for navigation. The fierce winds, riding on the waves with a rushing sound that raises the billows high above their heads, had to trouble them more than a little bit. Yes, and through all of this, John records, “Jesus was not yet with them.” This was the real danger, and Christ’s absence from these voyagers was making their fear grow more and more.

Those who are not with Jesus are in a fierce tempest of a storm. They are cut off from him or at least seem to be absent from him because they have departed from his holy laws. Because of their sin they are separated from the one who is able to save. If then it is overwhelming to be in such spiritual darkness, if it is oppressive to be swamped by the bitter sea of pleasures, let us then receive Jesus. For this is what will deliver us from dangers and from death in sin. Commentary on the Gospel of John 3.4.

The Church in the Storm.

Augustine: He fled alone to the mountain—the first begotten from the dead—because he has ascended above all the heavens and is interceding for us. ... But while he was above what were the disciples enduring in the ship below? For that ship prefigured the church while he is on high....

While they were sailing to [Capernaum], John tells us what happened to them. It became dark and Jesus had not come to them. It was right that John said it was dark, because the light [Jesus] had not yet come to them. As the end of the world draws near, errors increase, terrors multiply, iniquity abounds and infidelity escalates. Light, again, is love according to John. Whoever hates his brother is in darkness. ... The waves and storms and winds then that agitate the ship, are the clamors of hurtful speech and love waxing cold.... Nevertheless the wind, and storm, and waves, and darkness were not able to stop and sink the vessel. For the one who endures to the end shall be saved....

And how does Jesus come to the disciples? He comes walking upon the waves, keeping all the swellings of the world under his feet, pressing down all of humanity's pride. And so it continues, so long as time endures, so long as the ages roll. Tribulations increase, all these swell and mount up: Jesus passes on treading upon the waves. And yet, so great are the tribulations that even those who have trusted in Jesus and who strive to persevere to the end greatly fear lest they fail.... But they open the gospel, they open the Scriptures and find all these things there foretold; that this is the Lord's doing. He tramples down the heights of the world that he may be glorified by the humble. Tractates on the Gospel of John 25.4–7.

In the Storm of This Life, We Need Prayer.

Isaiah of Scete: Like a pilot steering a boat through the waves, one should hold to the course, guided by grace. Keeping his attention fixed within himself, he should commune with God in stillness, guarding his thoughts from distraction and his intellect from curiosity.

In storms and squalls we need a pilot, and in this present life we need prayer, for we are susceptible to the provocations of our thoughts, both good and bad. If our thought is full of devotion and love of God, it rules over the passions. On Guarding the Intellect 23–24.

6:19–20 Do Not Be Afraid

Divine Help Is Ours.

Cyril of Alexandria: Christ does not appear to those in the boat immediately after they set sail or at the onset of danger but only when they are far away from the shore. For the grace of our Savior does not come to us when our tribulations begin but when our fear is at its height and the danger shows itself to be great—when we are found, so to say, in the midst of the waves of affliction. Then, Christ appears unexpectedly and removes our fear and frees us from all danger. By his ineffable power he changes horror into joy, and as it were, calms the storm.... When Christ appears and looks on us, we shall effortlessly succeed even against our hope. And we who are in danger because of our distance from Christ shall no longer have to labor to accomplish what is helpful for us when he is present. Christ is our deliverance from all danger and the accomplishment of achievements beyond hope to those who receive him. Commentary on the Gospel of John 3.4.