

Matthew 14:22-33 – Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Here we are – continuing to listen to Matthew’s account of the Gospel – the good news – and once again, we are seeing how Peter is so willing to honour and follow the call and command of Jesus – but there is still something not quite embedded in his faith – he is willing enough, but still doubts in himself and in the power and presence of his Master. And of course, this is reassuring news that despite us not being able to maintain confidence in our faith or in ourselves, having a go is what it’s all about – trying is the achievement.

As Bishop Andrew says in his sermon for today – ‘Faith in these terms is not just going through the Creed and signing our name beside each of its propositions. ... No, true faith consists of taking the hand of the Living God and courageously allowing him to lead us wherever He would have us go: ‘having soft hearts’, as the missionary Jackie Pullinger puts it, ‘and hard feet’. and the apostles Paul and Peter, that was both very rewarding and very costly. Because having soft hearts, which beat with compassion for the world God loves so much; and hard feet, which are willing to go anywhere at the Lord’s command – I wonder where the Lord is calling you to go – and calling our church and communities to go in the weeks to come...

Let’s look a little closer at this walking on water miracle story – one that is accounted in Mark chapter 6, John, chapter 6 and here in Matthew’s Gospel.

When the disciples go on ahead when a storm begins. You will remember that some of the disciples are familiar with life on the water as fishermen, so this particular storm doesn’t appear to be worrying them unduly. But what definitely did instil fear in them was when there was the sudden appearance of Jesus ‘walking on the sea’ – that fact all the Gospel writers agree upon.

Matthew’s account differs in that this is the only account that tells us of how Peter is called by Jesus to join him. ‘Take Courage, it is I’ – powerful words that echo the words spoken to Moses by God ‘I am’ – ‘Don’t be afraid’ Jesus says... Just before divine revelations in the Bible, there often comes those words – ‘Don’t be afraid’ – for Moses, for David, for the people in exile words proclaimed by Isaiah – ‘Fear not for I have redeemed you – I have called you by name, you are mine – when you pass through the waters I will be with you...’ – for Mary as the Angel came to give her the news that she had been chosen – and now to the disciples – and more especially to Peter.

We are supposed to be afraid when we are faced with the awesome presence of the Lord – when we are being called to step out into the unknown – to follow that divine call to let go and let God - and here Jesus reveals himself as the beyond-human divine caller. God is pictured several times in the Old Testament walking on or through the sea. Isaiah proclaims of God; ‘This is what the Lord says – he who made a way through the sea, a path through the might waters... Psalm 77 – ‘Your road led through the sea, your pathway through the mighty waters – a pathway no one knew was there!

And so he is called – and Peter boldly steps out – in faith and trust – until he falters and begins to sink. He cries out to be rescued – and does Jesus rebuke him – have a go at him for failing? No – he gently points out his lack of faith – you can almost see the smile on his face... And then – Jesus receives recognition from the disciples that he is nothing less than the ‘Son of God’.

Peter and the disciples were faced with the sense that not only are they vulnerable when out in the vast open sea – especially in the chaos of a storm – but also vulnerable when confronted with the reality that they are witnessing a divine presence in Jesus. They have to dig deep for courage and trust – and to come to terms that actually all that they are encouraged to believe and trust in faith is actually true.

Isn’t that like us today – aren’t we living just like we are in the storm of life – in the storm of the global pandemic – natural disasters – man-made disasters such as the tragic explosion in Beirut.

We are out on a limb – out of control – and have to dig deep and step out in a leap of faith, trusting that God is in it with us and that if we hold fast to our faith, that we will reach the safe arms of God with encouragement of a beckoning of Jesus we experience and respond to through the power of his Holy Spirit calling us on.

Have you ever been confronted with situations in your life when you thought 'I just can't do this – or 'I just can't go on...' – when everything seems just impossible and overwhelms. Illness, the loss of a loved one – a job loss – a fall-out with a friend... I don't know about you, but being able to turn to friends in times of need – someone to say 'Don't be afraid – you're not alone' 'I am here for you' is the most reassuring sense of being held through the stormy trouble. And I don't know about you, but when you are confused and troubled, isn't it lovely to have someone comfort you through a prayer or a word of scripture to encourage and remind us that we have a faith – no matter how faint – and that to turn to Jesus – no matter how feebly – and say 'Here I am, coming to you – but I'm sinking in the waters and going under is the moment of weakness that becomes strength as he catches us and pulls us up out of the deep sea of sorrow and plants us in the middle of the boat with a gentle smile as if to say 'Don't you remember I'm here – have faith and come to me'.

Gentle words of comfort through prayer, through fellowship, through little acts of kindness are what we find in our church community – our church family. Time and time again, people are out in the sea of life and need rescuing every now and then with a reminder that we are not alone – that we are in the boat and if we feel ourselves sinking we will be pulled up into safety once more.

Next time you go into a church – perhaps St Peter's church next week – as you sit down and look up – you will see how the ceiling is shaped just like the hull of a boat – and that we are securely in the middle of the boat, safe for that moment in time in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and in the one body of Jesus who is at the helm.

And one thing that has become a blessing throughout our time in recent months where we have come together to find ways to be church beyond the brick walls of our St Peter's building – is that we have actually been held up and pulled up from the storm of our pandemic, lockdown lives by a spiritual lifeboat that doesn't depend on everyone being physically together at the same time – doing worship in the same way – or expressing our prayers in the same format. We are in the safety of the lifeboat of faith because of the fact that our hearts are open to the heavenly love of God that Jesus shows us how to live out on the ground – which means that for our church family and community, no matter where we are or how we do it – we are all looking out for each other and all trying to make sure that collectively we stay afloat, trusting that when we seem to be sinking, Jesus is there to pick us up and show us how to remember that we are not at the helm, but that he is right there steering us from storm to calm – from sea to shore....

"Lord, save me!" [Peter said as he began to sink....] Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." Amen.

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