

Sermon 13 August 2023, 08.30, BCP Holy Communion, All Saints' Cottenham
Matthew 14.22-32 and Romans 10.5-15
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Why did you doubt? O you of little faith!

A couple of years ago in the United States the multi-series TV production of 'The Chosen' was being filmed. It was designed for binge watching and is about the life of Jesus, told through the eyes of 'The Chosen', the disciples. The director was passionate about helping viewers to encounter Jesus in a very personal, intimate, immediate way. And what dramatic material he had to work with in today's reading! That scene in Matthew's Gospel: the uncontrollable storm on the sea of Galilee, the terrified disciples, Jesus walking across the enormous waves, Peter jumping out to try and do the same, Peter sinking and calling out to Jesus to save him, Jesus catching him, getting into the boat with him and the sea immediately calming. It was absolutely ideal for filming with special effects and loud music etc. It took 18 hours of filming with lots of actors, a boat and a powerful wave machine in a giant blue tank of water to finalise just seconds of that scene.

There's a clip on YouTube where the film crew say it was an extremely emotional experience that they will never forget. They knew they were not filming someone literally walking on water but they still were caught up in the deeper meaning of the story.

2000 years ago three of the New Testament Gospel writers, Mark, John and Matthew did much the same as that 21st century film company. They all included this dramatic episode, painting the picture in words designed to be read out and repeated over and over again – the equivalent in the 1st century of binge-hearing rather than binge-watching!

All three writers, Matthew (chapter 14), Mark (chapter 6) and John (chapter 6) include the storm, the terrified disciples and Jesus walking on the water towards the boat. All three record that Jesus said "Don't be afraid, I'm with you" and the storm immediately stopped.

But Matthew's Gospel goes further than the others. It's the only Gospel that focusses on Peter's individual experience, inviting us to identify with an intimately human encounter, not only the group encounter of all the disciples. It's also significant that only in Matthew's account does Jesus rescue Peter with the words "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Those words occur in Matthew's Gospel four more times in different stories directed at the disciples. It was clearly an important saying of Jesus that Matthew wanted to record.

Today it's very common to talk about Peter being the impetuous disciple, acting first, thinking afterwards. It can sometimes make for a rather cosy picture of the man, rather reassuring, but that can be misleading. At the time Matthew's Gospel was written, Peter was already widely known as a leader and martyr. With hindsight, that makes Jesus's words to Peter in the storm even more dramatic. They are a challenge, a personal rebuke to an immensely important figure in early Christianity.

The modern theologian, Tom Wright, reminds us that this story was always intended to have multiple deeper meanings than simply a dramatic rescue at sea. The 1st century audience would not have taken it literally, any more than we need to. They would have recognised the many parallels with other parts of the Christian story. They would see the link with Peter the fisherman being called out of his boat to follow Jesus, becoming one of the very first disciples. When they heard that the disciples were terrified at seeing Jesus walking on the water, crying out "It is a ghost" (verse 26) they would be reminded of Peter's reaction to the shock of the Resurrection and the confusing appearances of Jesus before his Ascension. Very often in the Gospels, the disciples find it difficult to understand what is happening, just as we might do today.

Today the parallels are absolutely with our own experiences as aspiring Christians. Our lives are often a frequent mixture of faith and doubt. We are often like the disciples in the boat, struggling in the storms of life. We're not literally in a 1st century fishing boat but we are living our everyday lives, coping with work, with health, with friends and family, all alongside aiming to learn from reading the Bible and praying. Like Peter jumping out of the boat in the storm, we bravely set out to copy Jesus but then we see all the difficulties and start to sink, start to give up. In the Gospel story, Jesus is very close, just a hand's stretch away, and Peter cries out "Lord save me!" which of course Jesus does immediately. How many times do we cry out like that: "Lord save me!"? Every time, help is just a hand's stretch away if only we could see it clearly, if only we had a little faith. Doubt and faith go hand in hand – that's absolutely normal.

The good news is that even a little faith can work wonders. In another part of Matthew's Gospel, chapter 17, Jesus tells the disciples: '... if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there", and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.'

Jesus often asks us to do what seems impossible. That's unlikely to be moving actual mountains but maybe it's things like being patient with a difficult member of the family, picking ourselves up after failing a test and trying again, coming to terms with a physical illness, carrying on living after the loss of someone dearly loved. It takes a very simple faith in God, in Jesus, to persist.

I started this sermon with a story about an American film crew making a dramatic visual account of the Gospel story. It has to be said that Christian film and TV do not work for everyone. But how about the words of hymns or songs that go straight for the key messages of faith? Here are two examples, both written by women, one by Cecil Frances Alexander in 1852 and one sung by Britt Nicole in the 2020s. You may know that traditional 19th century hymn that we sometimes sing at All Saints’:

*Jesus calls us o’er the tumult
of our life’s wild, restless sea;
day by day His sweet voice soundeth,
saying ‘Christian, follow me’.*

That’s the simple message of Jesus: Christian, follow me.

I also like the words of the 21st century Christian song:

*So what are you waiting for? What do you have to lose?
Your insecurities try to alter you. You know you’re made for more.
So don’t be afraid to move.
Your faith is all it takes.
And you can walk on the water, walk on the water too.*

Don’t be afraid to move. Faith is really all it takes, simple faith. One member of our 8.30 congregation memorably said the other week, *“faith can get simpler as we get older having filtered out all the distractions”*. I reckon that’s great theology. Whatever age we are, Jesus keeps challenging us, as he did to Peter, to keep faith simple.

So here to finish is a prayer based on what Tom Wright says about the story in Matthew’s Gospel.

Dear God,

- help us as Christians to do something very basic and obvious, like Peter in the Gospel story
- help us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus
- help us to keep our ears open for his encouragement
- help us to keep our will and heart ready to do what Jesus says, even if it seems crazy at the time

We pray to have faith that nothing is impossible with Jesus, even metaphorically walking on the water. **Amen.**