

7 August 2011 Struggling with Faith

1 Kings 19. 9-18; Romans 10. 5-15; Matthew 14.22-33

Despite claims to the contrary in some quarters, not many people can walk on water. It was once summed up by this little story.

A rabbi, a priest and a pastor were all in a small boat, fishing in the middle of a lake. The rabbi suddenly felt hot and tired and decided he would go and have a snooze on the beach, so he got out and walked across the water to the shore. A bit later the priest felt the same way, said goodbye to the pastor, and walked across the water to join the rabbi on the shore. As they looked across to the boat they saw that the pastor had now changed his mind and was in the process of getting out of the boat to come across and join them, but as soon as he started walking, he disappeared beneath the waves. The rabbi looked at the priest and said, “Do you think we should have told him about the rocks?”

I wonder how many people here have seen the beautiful lake which is called the Sea of Galilee or Lake Gennaseret or by one or two other names. Some people have seen the lake as a sort of bridge from heaven to earth – the waters, the mountains and the big open sky where one can feel a sense of closeness to God.

It’s quite large, although on a clear day you can certainly see across it to the eastern side and the Golan Heights further away. Our Lord must have known it well, especially as some of his disciples were fishermen and would have earned their living by sailing on its normally calm waters.

But as in daily life, nothing is ever quite plain sailing, and the lake is prone to sudden squalls and storms brimming up very fast and almost out of nowhere. Perhaps that might describe our daily life when something comes along to rock our normally placid boat, whether we want it to or not. Many people in the ancient Near East believed that power over the sea was the prerogative of the sea gods, and therefore anything stronger than them must be very strong indeed. Anyone who could calm the waves and still the storm was clearly somebody exceptional.

After a long day at the lakeside and the feeding of the 5,000, the crowd had departed and Jesus ordered the disciples to set sail and make for the other side of the lake. But hardly have they set off when they encounter bad weather and rough seas. Don’t we all have times like that – the sun shines on a calm morning, but suddenly there are clouds on your horizon.

We can see the disciples battling against a headwind as symbolic of their mission and ministry – a young church under strain and persecution. Two thousand years later our church is still facing desperate storms over money and sexuality and other issues which distract us from what we really ought to be about. It's the harsh reality of Christian discipleship. And when the encounter with Jesus and the disciples on the lake comes in the early morning, we know that some people have been struggling all night.

To see somebody walking over the water is not a daily occurrence. No wonder the disciples react instinctively and think they've seen a ghost. This is hardly silent and planned worship, but more like an unself-conscious rehearsal. They don't understand the implication of their actions.

Walking on the water was highly symbolic for the early Christians – any one who did that must have been divinely sent. Now they could see Jesus' intimacy with God – if Jesus can rule the waves, then he must be the Son of God.

But Peter still struggles with his faith and wants more proof : “Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you over the water. Identify yourself!” O ye of little faith....

Jesus' divine dominion over the waters did indeed allow Peter to walk over them as well – here was a bridge spanning the divine and human divide which Peter literally walked. And for the first time the disciples now recognize Jesus as the son of God because he has exercised powers reserved for God alone.

But suddenly Peter gets distracted from looking at his master and gets a soaking as he begins to sink. He's begun to think about what might go wrong and has lost his lifeline. If he had kept his eyes firmly on Jesus he wouldn't have sunk. But by worrying about potential dangers and looking for problems before they'd arisen, he came a cropper. We might call it going to meet trouble halfway.

It might rain this afternoon, so let's not go out for a walk and get wet, but stay at home. There might be people at that party I don't like, so I won't go. The theatre performance tonight will probably be amateurish, so I won't waste my money. No risk and no gain.

That sounds like a rather limited and dull life. We progress by sometimes being brave and stepping into the unknown to cross those waves.

And yes, life is full of difficulties, but have we ever been promised anything else? Does God exist to keep us safe and innocent and wrapped in cottonwool, far away from what's going on all around us? No - obedience to his will is not a guarantee for a quiet life. We may have to go through our own personal storms. It's a dangerous planet, as the news shows us every day.

Jesus assuredly keeps us safe from harm, but not from danger. Peter didn't realise that no ordinary person could have been walking over the water towards the boat, so remained afraid. What he had to do was trust a bit further and step out of the boat and do the impossible. All things are possible with God. He had to sink in order to grow.

Ultimately, he recognized his Lord and had faith, but didn't quite have enough courage to get out and walk – that needed wisdom and discernment. It seemed illogical and dangerous to get out into and onto the water, but he would actually be safer doing that than remaining in a storm-tossed boat.

All the others stayed in the boat, preferring to be rocked physically but not mentally. They would not know what it was like to walk with Christ until Peter's determination opened their eyes. Obedience does not guarantee escaping storms and adversity.

The storm on the lake was not unforeseen by Jesus. He was not being careless or care-free with the lives of the disciples. As the boat pushed off from the shore he was already praying for them up a hill. There was a lesson they had to learn, but only when they were in the middle of the storm.

This morning, at least for a few hours here in church, our lives are firmly on the shore. We have heard about Jesus, and seen him in all kinds of ways – perhaps just by being here in this little community this morning. But do we follow him? Can we break the mould of being safe and staying in our little boat? Perhaps it's rocking a tiny bit and needs to rock further – maybe to the point of our falling out and having to pick ourselves up with a different view of things afterwards. All that cottonwool might have disappeared after we have got out and begun to grow.

St Paul in the passage from Romans asks how people can call on Christ without faith, and how people can have faith in Christ without having seen him, and how can they hear a message without a messenger to spread the news. The answer is that there is no need to bring our Lord down from heaven, because he has already been sent to us, and there is no need to bring him up from the dead, because God has already done that.

What he is emphasising is the nearness of the word. That message about Christ is actually all around us. It's very close indeed – on our lips and in our hearts – if only we would recognize it by faith and belief. Let our faith be bigger and our belief be stronger than those waves. Look beyond to the one who stands behind them.

Yes, there are times when Jesus Christ may seem scary and doesn't act as we think we want him to. Sometimes he asks us the seemingly impossible – and more beyond that. But which is the bigger – those waves or our faith? Faith leads to righteousness and confession to salvation.

When St John Chrysostom was reflecting on the story of the wind and the waves, he observed that “the wilderness is the mother of silence; it is a calm and a harbour, delivering us from all turmoils.” Perhaps if we can find more time for private and silent worship, then we can manage the impossible and walk across the waves to the true harbour of heaven.