

Sermon for Trinity 9 – 9th August 2020. Matthew 14: 22-33

When I'm thinking about passages from the Gospels I often find it useful to try and put myself in the disciples' place, to try and see things as they saw them. It is easy for us to think that it must have been easier for them than it is for us. After all, they had Jesus with them, they witnessed his miracles first-hand and heard him teach. But still they failed to recognise him and to have faith that he would save them.

In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, the disciples in the boat found it hard to believe what they saw. But who wouldn't? This was a very big lake where storms blow up unexpectedly. They had been out on that lake all night, battling the winds waves, so they must have been tired. When they saw a figure moving on the water perhaps they reasoned: "it looked like Jesus and sounded like Jesus, but people can't walk on water, so surely it was a ghost." Like others during Jesus' ministry, Peter asked for a sign: "Lord. If it is you, command me to come to you on the water." But he addressed Jesus as "Lord" so he must already have believed it was him. Having seen Jesus feed a huge crowd the previous day, Peter knew that his Lord really was capable of the seemingly impossible.

When Jesus commanded him to come, Peter stepped out of the relative safety of the boat and began to walk on the water. What happened next is significant. Peter took his eyes off Jesus for a moment and noticed the strong wind. The dangers of this world momentarily overcame his faith. But which faith? Bible commentators have different opinions on this. Some believe it was Peter's faith in Jesus that failed. Others are of the opinion that it was his faith in himself that wavered? They argue, and I tend to agree with them, that Peter's faith in Jesus clearly didn't waver, because his first reaction was to cry out to the Lord: "Lord, save me!"

In due course, Peter would discover that Jesus could save him not only from the dangers of the deep, the imminent prospect of drowning, but from death itself. All Peter's doubts and denials were eventually overcome by the triumph of the cross. The resurrection also marked the renewal of Peter's faith, not only in Jesus but in himself. Strengthened by encounters with the risen Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter became the first leader of the Church.

Jesus had every confidence in Peter. He would shortly call him the rock on which that Church would be built. And even in today's Gospel, once they reach the boat, Jesus encourages his friend in words that are too

often interpreted as a rebuke: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” But perhaps he really did mean: “Why did you doubt yourself?”

Jesus walked on water – but so did Peter. As in so many other things, Peter represents all disciples, then and now. Through this episode, what we might call a living parable, Jesus reassures us that we too are capable of achieving the seemingly impossible if we keep our eyes on him. Jesus calls all of us to come to him and to help others come to him. And when the dangers and distractions of this world threaten to overwhelm us he reaches out to us and reminds us not to doubt, but to hold on to him. When our faith in him or in ourselves is weakened by tiredness, as happened to Peter and the other weary disciples on the lake that night, Jesus will come walking towards us on the water, however rough the waves or strong the winds.

Without Peter, the Church might not have flourished as it did. Without us, in today’s increasingly secular world, it may wither and die. So what can we do today to help others come to Jesus? When it all seems impossible, and we are tempted to stay in the relative safety of the boat, the church building, the familiar words of worship, may we have the courage to step out in faith, into the world, knowing that God has faith in us to tell others about Jesus.