

Matthew 14:22-33 Jesus walks on water

Taking a day off, Jesus and St. Peter decide to play golf. At one of the holes in the course, they came up to a short shot over a shallow pond. St Peter tees up first. He stops and thinks for a moment and then states, "I'm going to use a 6 iron." St. Peter swings and lands a beautiful shot about three feet away from the cup.

Jesus tees up next. He ponders the shot, and then declares, "Tiger Woods would use a 7 iron." He takes his 7 iron, pulls back, and swings. The ball goes too high in the air and lands right in the middle of the pond. Jesus casually walks on the water, retrieves his ball, and tees up. He swings and, again, his shot ends up in the pond.

"Why don't you use a 6 iron?" asked St. Peter.

"No!" retorts Jesus. "Tiger Woods would use a 7!"

This goes on for several shots - swing, splash, walk on water, recover ball. By this time, other golfers have caught up to Jesus and St. Peter. After watching Jesus walk on water several times to retrieve his ball one baffled golfer turns to St. Peter and asks, "Who does that guy think he is, Jesus?"

"No," replies St. Peter. "Tiger Woods."

Intro

It's interesting just to look at the slight differences in the Gospels and the telling of the same story. Last week you may remember me

saying that Matthew had constructed his Gospel in a way to highlight certain things as he was writing for his Jewish audience. This week we see a subtle differences in Matthew's telling of this familiar story of Jesus walking on the water. The story is recorded in three gospels, Matthew, Mark and John's. Both Matthew & Mark's gospel tell us that Jesus put the disciples in the boat whilst he went off alone to pray. Matthew then tells us that when Jesus walked on the surface of the lake, his friends in the boat were terrified, they thought they were seeing a ghost. The boat had been battered by the waves and was far from land, but the rough surface of the water made no difference to Jesus. He had spent the whole night on the mountain alone in prayer, so perhaps it was this spiritual strength which gave Jesus the ability to walk on the water?

Peter

Jesus assures the frightened disciples, but Peter, the one who seems to have endless enthusiasm, the one who always seems to jump in with both feet, is a little cautious this time. "Lord, if it is you then order me to come out on the water to you!" Peter is usually ready to do whatever for Jesus, but what does he say "If it is you...." If....There are only a couple of other times in the gospel when someone addresses Jesus with "If," and neither of them are very complimentary. The devil does it three times when he tempts Jesus

in the desert, "If you are the Son of God," make these stones into bread, throw yourself off this building, bow down and worship me. When Jesus is hanging on the cross, people mock him, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." And here, Peter, usually faithful, willing and enthusiastic, joins in with his voice "Lord, if it is you then order me to come out on the water to you!"

If..... It seems that Peter has doubts before he gets out of the boat and so it isn't much of a surprise when he sinks. As he sinks he calls out to Jesus, "Save me, Lord!" Jesus stretched out a hand and caught hold of Peter and when they were back safely in the boat, all the disciples worshipped Jesus, saying "Truly you are the Son of God!" Although this incident of Jesus walking on the water is also recorded in Mark and John's gospel, it is only Matthew who has this bit about Peter attempting to imitate Jesus, and only Matthew records that this incident caused the disciples to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. This isn't a surprise knowing that Matthew is, as I said last week, writing for the Jewish community and so he is using this story to reinforce the difference between Jesus and ordinary mortals, and to prove that Jesus has these divine qualities as the Son of God, to show the Jewish community that he is the true Messiah.

Walk on water

Walking on water has become synonymous, even outside the church, with the idea of stepping out in boldness, taking a risk. No doubt Jesus wants us to take risks for the sake of the gospel. No doubt Jesus wants us to keep our eyes focussed on him and his mission, unlike Peter who got easily distracted. No doubt Jesus wants us to have the gift of faith, after all he's the one who told the fishermen to leave everything and follow him. He's the one who tells us to take up our cross and to lose our lives for his sake. The one who said that if we have faith even the size of a mustard seed, we could say to the mountain, get up and move, and it would move. No doubt Jesus wants us to take risks, be bold, to be courageous for the sake of the Gospel, step out in faith and follow. But all of that sounds like it implies we do those things individually, like Peter being the only one stepping out of the boat. What about the other disciples who were there in the boat, what were they doing?

Matthew's gospel isn't written for individuals, it is written with that Jewish community in mind. It is written in a way that makes them think about who they are, about the things they do, as I said last week, it questions their preconceived ideas about the kingdom of God and who might be in or out. Matthew's gospel is really interested in community and in figuring out what it means to be this

new thing, the church, the body of Christ in the world, the people who are trying to follow Christ together.

Ship

From the very early days in the Christian community the image of a ship has been a symbol for the church, and no wonder, think of a ship, a vessel which is large, which takes a number of people doing such diverse things just to get it moving. If you go to St Mark's in Harrogate, a church which I've been to a number of times, the architect has designed part of the interior to look like a ship, drawing inspiration from bible passages such as this one. Personally I think it's a bit ugly, but a ship is a great symbol for the church. Moving through the waters on a beautiful day can be glorious, and when the wind, water and sailors cooperate, the journey is grand.

But sometimes, life on the ship can get routine. The same chores need doing every day and the wind doesn't always do what the sailors want. A large crew means a variety of people, which means a variety of ideas and personalities. A ship's mission can be jeopardised by those who are tempted to set sail alone, or by mutiny, or just by people who want to jump overboard, or jump ship because they think it's in trouble. Ships are big, often cumbersome

and it takes a great deal of effort and cooperation from the crew to get a ship to turn around, and it takes a long time.

It is interesting that in all three accounts of this story, Jesus ends up in the boat with the disciples, even though in Mark's account we are told he intended to pass them by. And if we go back to the church as a ship image, this story indicates Jesus being in the midst of the Church, seeking to be with and assuring the crew of the boat.

Storms

Storms will blow up in all our lives, but Jesus has not left us alone. The one who calms the storms and makes the winds cease is still with us. And whilst that image continues to be true, the church with Jesus at the centre offering a place of stillness and sanctuary in the midst of life's troubles, the boat should never remain static. The purpose of a boat, a ship, is to get somewhere. It is a form of transport, in this case it was taking the disciples to the other side of the lake, so they could get on with their job of ministering to the people. The disciples also had to be active within the boat. If they had been curled up in the hold, they would have never seen Jesus walking on the water towards them, nor would they have been inspired by the encounter.

If we wish that encounter with Jesus and wish to be inspired by him, we need to be actively working on his behalf, on a ship that's dynamic and moving through the sea, rather than waiting passively for Jesus to come to us.

There are plenty of adventures ahead, there will be storms and winds from time to time, which will blow up in all our lives. But Jesus has not left us alone. He is with us and he still has work for us to do. And yes, that means we will need to step out in faith, but it also means not getting out of the boat and going it alone, not leaving the community of disciples, because the boat, a ship, needs a crew and there is strength and inspiration in being together as part of that crew.

May Jesus meet us in the storms and calm the raging of the sea. May he be with us in the midst of the ship as we sail towards adventure and may our hearts and minds be inspired by his presence, today and always.