

Matthew 14:22-33. Jesus Walks on the Water.

Romans 10:5-15

August 9th 2020 by Sharon

Online sermon. Christ Church Oakworth and St. John's Newsholme

Jesus, Son of God may we hear you and see you in our lives, hearts and minds today, and continue to seek your presence this week. Amen

Our gospel reading today is a popular story. I would confidently say that many people, Christian or not, have heard of Jesus walking on water.

I shared the short film version of Matthew's account that we have just seen with someone who is not a Christian and professes to have no belief whatsoever in God. That person watched it and said, rather apologetically, at the end

"I don't really get it!"

Which of course brought a smile to my face because a lot of Matthew's gospel shares with us times where even those closest to Jesus, the disciples, didn't fully 'get it' a lot of the time either, especially Peter.

They miss the point quite often which I like, especially remembering when I first 'came to faith', in my 40s, so just over 10 years ago, when I really didn't get what other Christians at church were talking about half the time!

I certainly had put every scientific barrier up and every doubt I had before finally seeking the affirmation of other Christians which led me to the community of Christ Church and St. John's.

Making friends

It was far easier to quickly make friends with those who are a part of our church community, to find a caring, listening ear and people who are willing to share their thoughts and experiences of their Christian faith, than it was to gain any instant lifechanging feelings for Jesus.

Jesus, to me, had previously been nothing more than a historical bible figure who Christians knew all about. I had begun attending because I had suddenly gained a realisation that 'I believe in God'.

I won't go into the testimony of how that happened now, but the point is at that time, especially at my first Lent group attendance, I was a bit concerned that I had no feelings for Jesus and so had real doubts and fears about not being certain about his miracles like being able to walk on water, and especially his resurrection, which of course is the foundation of our Christian faith.

With this initial typical human doubt and lack of faith, it is no surprise that many of us would rather believe that any spiritual presence in our lives must be a ghostly supernatural haunting, rather than a divine powerful experience from God who is always waiting to connect with us.

So it is of some comfort to learn that even the disciples who are the closest to Jesus, still do not fully recognise beyond doubt that Jesus is indeed the divine authority that is *the* God that they are so used to and have been steeped in tradition and knowledge of straight away.

In our gospel, they are being buffeted in their small boat by the waves that are caused by the contrary strong winds, yet Matthew tells us that they are more terrified of the surreal figure that is walking on the sea towards them, which surely must be a ghost.

The disciples are familiar with Old Testament teaching regarding only the divine God who command or walk on the seas, never a flesh and blood human having the authority to do so.

Matthew's Jewish church Christians need the comfort of being reminded that Jesus' ministry is not over after he was crucified but that he remains with them always, at the very centre of their church, even during their storms of persecution, and for always.

Our churches need reminding of that too. It is too easy for us to forget to cry out to Jesus for help, often waiting until we feel we are literally sinking before asking for him to save us. Jesus' identity and his saving grace for us all is the main point of Matthew's story.

Gospel

Peter still showed his doubts when Jesus reassured him and the others, instantly calming their fears. They are not to be afraid, which is to encourage them, (see 1:20) and (28:5, 10) and (17:7), and to be of good cheer no matter what storms come their way.

Jesus uses the 'I am' affirmation that he is indeed YHWH their God, mirroring Exodus chapter 3 verse 14 when God said 'I am who I am. You must tell them: The one who is called I am has sent me to you'.

John's account tells us that the disciples had gone about 25 to 30 stadia (6:19) about 3 miles out. This reiterates the divine power to walk on the sea that Jesus has and clearly the disciples cannot so easily reach the shore in a storm, further highlighting their need of Jesus.

Jesus again sees their instant need in a storm, but this time the fear the disciples have has been caused by his ghostly appearance, which would have looked surreal in the early dawn and mist. The fourth watch of the night was from 3am to 6am and so the disciples will have been able to see Jesus as the nearing of dawn approaches.

Yet Peter again wants proof. Although he has the enthusiasm and faith to want to imitate Jesus by getting out of the boat, he says 'IF it is really you order me to come out on the water to you'.

This is echoing the devil's tempting of Jesus saying 'If you are the Son of God' in chapter 4 verses 3 and 6. When Peter says 'command me to come to you on the waters, he echoes the devil's challenge to 'command that these stones become bread'. All again pointing to the identity of Jesus.

Jesus does not give in to the devil's commands but here he gives in to Peter's request.

Peter steps out of the boat, but then becomes fully aware of the winds and takes his focus off Jesus and tries to deal alone with the danger he sees himself in.

In desperation as he begins to sink, through his doubts and little faith, he has to cry out 'Lord save me'.

Psalm 69:1-3 comforts us with the words,
Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck,
I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God.

So how does Jesus respond, he 'stretches out his hand'.

Again an echo from a Psalm, this time from Psalm 18:15-16.
The valleys of the sea were exposed, and the foundations of the earth laid bare at your rebuke Lord, at the blast of breath from your nostrils.
He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out to deep waters.

Matthew leaves us in no doubt here as to Jesus acting as God. The disciples are now conscious that they are in the presence of God and they worship him. By walking on the sea, Jesus overcomes the power of chaos and the powers like the parting of the Red Sea in psalm 77:19, which say 'you walked through the waves, you crossed the deep sea, but your footprints could not be seen'.

Augustine likens church to being like a ship. He writes:
'The ship, which carries the disciples, i.e., the church, is tossed and shaken by the tempests of temptation; and the contrary wind, i.e., the devil her

adversary, rests not, and strives to hinder her from arriving at rest. But greater is 'He who maketh intercession for us'.

We can certainly see some stormy challenges as some of our congregation are now in church and some of us are still unable to be.

Church

It is important to remember what Matthew is reminding us about our church Christian community here. We are still part of the same ship, journeying forwards together. We are inevitably not always going to agree with one another because we are all so diverse and our Christian journeys, how and when Jesus has reached us and changed us is also diverse. Here though we discover those who have been rescued by Jesus, those who encounter God through him, through his Holy Spirit.

Unlike a ship that is solely a pleasure cruiser, where we are to relax and be at leisure, we are all called to radiate the light of Christ to one another as well as towards others in need, even during the storms like our churches being closed for so long during the pandemic.

If our church is indeed a ship, our mission statement would be written on the side, Knowing, Showing and Sharing God's love. This is where you will continue to grow a heart changing relationship with Jesus, no matter what the storm. And he will reach out to you.

Most importantly of all, Jesus went up a mountain to pray to his Father, always central to his and our mission.

Let us pray.

Lord may we focus on you at the centre of our church, our lives. No matter how far we get out to sea, may the new crew member, our vicar be compelled to catch up with us soon, and help us to continue to seek and radiate your love, peace and hope for us and our community in our mission and ministry. Amen