

Sunday 9th August 2020
9th Sunday after Trinity (A)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: I Kings 19.9-18
NT: Romans 10.5-15
G: Matthew 14.22-33

'Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt'

Amongst the gifts I was given on my ordination as a priest was one from a friend at All Saints Church, Joyce, who sadly has since died wanted me to have a preaching scarf but rather than a plain scarf she wanted me to have one that had something embroidered onto it of special meaning to me, The motif that is embroidered on the scarf I am wearing this morning is an interpretation of a painting by the German Priest Father Sieger Köder , he painted in a unique style and interpreted the gospel message in ways that enhance our understanding. Ordained in his forties Sieger used his prior training as an artist and silversmith to deepen his theological understanding and create paintings that are an earthy, yet spiritual interpretation of biblical themes. The image that I chose for my preaching scarf is his interpretation of today's Gospel and in particular verse 31 with which I prefaced this sermon.

The painting showing the 2 hands of Peter emerging from the water grasping the hand of Jesus and in that moment the wind ceased, and the disciples understood who Jesus was.

The account in Matthew's Gospel of Jesus walking on the water comes immediately after the feeding of the 5000. Jesus has sent the disciples away by boat to cross the lake, he has dismissed the large crowd and is, finally, alone and able to go up a mountain by himself. At last, some time to mourn the death of John, his kinsman, and to pray to his Heavenly Father. One wonders what the disciples were talking about in the boat? They had witnessed a great miracle, what would happen next? Whatever their discussions, all was not going so well on

the lake for, despite the presence of fishermen amongst them, the winds made their progress slow.

We can only imagine their surprise when, early in the morning still probably tossing about a bit in choppy water on the lake, they see what appears to be a ghost-like figure coming towards them, seemingly walking on the water. Jesus offers comforting words, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid". It is not unexpected that Peter, ever eager to rush in and often not making a particularly good job of it, tests the theory this is Jesus by offering to climb out of the boat and walk on water too.

A short distance into this, battered by the wind, he starts to sink and cries out to Jesus to save him. Immediately Jesus stretches out his hand and rescues him, accusing Peter of having little faith and being full of doubt. With the two men safely installed back in the boat, the disciples worshipped Jesus saying "Truly you are the Son of God". Seemingly, two miracles in a short space of time.

So, what can we learn from this story? First, Peter had to learn that the miracles Jesus achieved were not done by some kind of sleight of hand or magic. If he got out the boat expecting to find a firm footing underneath him, he was quickly disappointed. He had to learn to trust and to stretch out his hand to receive the blessing that would save him in his fear. He had to learn that disciples of Jesus do their work by God's command and authority, just as Jesus himself did.

God is always close to us but sometimes we are very reluctant to see that for ourselves and to place our trust in him.

As the theologian, Tom Wright, notes reflecting on our own times of great need, “The moment when we are most strongly tempted to give up is probably the moment when help is, if only we knew it, just a step away.”

We are often invited by God to take on things we honestly feel are impossible and we can fail all too easily because we start to take note of the bits in our new challenge that aren't going well. What we actually need to do is fix our eyes on God and listen to his words – we have to be ready to respond as he teaches, even if it doesn't feel that safe in our human understanding.

Walking on the water, Jesus demonstrated very visibly to his disciples (and to us) how God can win against any form of chaos and disorder but we must have faith and put our trust in him.

In 2001 a book entitled “If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat” became a best-selling Christian publication. In it the author, John Ortberg, explored how it is possible to “walk on water” in God's strength but never on your own. He invited readers to journey with him to explore what this might look like. He identified a consistent pattern in life when God wants to use and improve somebody.

There is always a call, there is always fear, there is always reassurance and there is always a decision to be made. Do you go God's way or do you prefer to strike out along the journey alone? The result is always a changed life but when you say “yes” to God, it is a life that grows and blossoms despite any obstacles on the way. It is a life that has the chance to model the way of truth and trust to a needy world.

Christianity is our faith, but it is also a relationship, offered by God through his Son, and we are invited to enter into it. We are invited to take that first step in faith, to step out of the boat and into the unseen future. As Christians we ask the Holy Spirit to guide our way – but do we really trust that each and every day?

We are often like Peter, eager to please, hasty in decisions and then bemused when things don't turn out as expected. Yet God comes to us not only in the stormy waves of life but in the quiet silence of our prayer, in the depth of our heart and mind. It is there God meets us and we can blossom and grow. It is there that Jesus stretches out a hand and says "Take it, it is I; do not be afraid".

The prophet Elijah heard the voice of God in the silence of a cave and obeyed

The wonders Elijah worked, and the extraordinary manner of his ascension to heaven, have given him a unique place in Jewish sacred tradition, which states that he will reappear to announce the arrival of the Messiah.

This belief that Elijah's coming would herald the presence of the Messiah was a belief held by all Jews at the time of Jesus. Some wondered if John the Baptist might be Elijah; some wondered if Jesus might be. When Matthew is writing his Gospel, some fifty-five years after the completion of Jesus' mission, he expresses the Christian belief that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. Matthew is facing a real problem: many of his Jewish converts feel estranged from their former partners in the faith, some of them are wavering, some renounce their faith when they are excluded from the synagogue. Matthew writes his Gospel to support them in their new faith in Jesus. Matthew tells his struggling community that even if their faith

falters and they panic when they look at the surrounding danger, Jesus – even though he is with the Father – will come and save them. This is Gospel. This is good news indeed.

Neither Elijah nor Peter had the faith to match their zeal, but God supported both of them in their dangerous tasks. That promise is extended to all who put their faith in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ. Often when we feel that we are battling against the odds, we wonder why Jesus always seems to be off somewhere else. And even though we know that we won't be asked to walk on water, we get that sinking feeling all the same. In that plight we are not thrown back on our resources.

In this community gathered in faith, we have the word of God and the bread of life and the support of each other. That has to be enough to keep us afloat.

Fr Bill Addy