

## **Sermon on Matthew 14: 22 -33 preached on Sunday 5 July 2020**

**I wonder if you have been on a boat in a storm?** Being on a boat in the middle of a storm is not a good place to be for anyone: but the story this morning begins on shore, much earlier, so let's go backwards in time for a minute. This is another familiar story of Peter – very often, boats and the very large Lake of Galilee feature a in these stories in Matthew and Mark; as so many of Jesus' disciples, including Peter, used to be fishermen. And **possibly, like me, you sang songs at church or Sunday School** about Jesus 'calling us o'er the tumult of our lives wild, restless sea', or 'with Christ in the boat, we can smile at the storm', and these songs have a certain truth in them, but let's look more carefully at the text or we may overlook important details.

**Events had gained a new intensity since Jesus' cousin John the Baptist had been beheaded (14:1-13)**, and Jesus' response has been to withdraw to pray. On Jesus' command, the disciples had just fed thousands of people who had followed Jesus even though he had retreated from them (13). The disciples had wanted Jesus to tell the crowds to go home, but full of compassion, he had fed them, and then dismissed both crowds and disciples (23). But before he dismisses the disciples, Jesus 'compells' them to get into a boat without him. It doesn't sound as if the disciples were very willing to go. **Where were the disciples supposed to be going in their boat?** They have been told to go over to the other side. If they had got used to Jesus being visibly with them, they had to do this one on their own, or so they must have thought. **Why didn't Jesus go with them?** Jesus goes to the mountains to pray. There are thousands of people flocking to hear him and to be healed – he needs time to reflect and recharge, and to face what he knows is in store for him if he continues his path to Jerusalem.

**The disciples had already experienced Jesus being in the boat** during a frightening storm (chapter 8), when he commanded the wind and the waves to 'Lie down' as if they were hounds. As experienced and local fisherman, they knew the lake could suddenly rise up like a monster. And sure enough, it does, battering the boat – the Greek word *basanizo* could be translated as 'torturing' the boat. It gives a feel for how scary the whole experience was. As one scholar says, 'first century audiences would have understood what we may miss, which is the **utter terror of waters unleashed from their boundaries**. In creation, God separated the waters into the dome above and the dome beneath. But there was the ever-present fear that broken boundaries could unleash chaotic waters. The story of Noah and the flood that destroyed a whole population was a communal memory of the potential dangers that water can unleash'. (Salmon, *Working Preacher*). Perhaps, a tsunami today would convey the same terror.

**After hours of battling for their lives, in the early hours of the morning, before dawn, and many miles from the shore**, Jesus comes to them, walking on the water. They are terrified. In the shrieking wind and the gigantic waves, they cannot see clearly. Is it a ghost? Jesus is doing what only God can

do – walk on water. Jesus calls out over the storm ‘Don’t be afraid...It is I.’ (Literally, I AM). ‘Don’t be afraid’ is what the Angel Gabriel said to young Mary (Luke 1:30), and it is what the men in white will say to the women at the tomb (Mark 16:6), and Jesus will say to the women as they leave the empty tomb (Matt 28:6). ‘Fear not!’ **A command of divine reassurance when events are overwhelming.** And by applying the O.T. “ **I AM**” to himself, the name given to Moses as God’s name when Moses is called to go to Pharaoh to demand the people of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, Jesus is telling his disciples very clearly who he is.

**Impetuous Peter’s response is honest but doubting.** ‘If it is you’ is the same phrase Jesus has met with from Satan in the temptations in the wilderness (4:3,6); and which Jesus will encounter from the high priest in his passion (26:63) and those around the cross, mocking him (27:40). Jesus must do something to prove he is who he declares himself to be. This time, graciously, Jesus does, by asking Peter to come to him. Full of hubris, Peter does, but Jesus doesn’t calm the waves or the wind, as he did before, and Peter begins to sink. **Divine assurance does not guarantee that the wind and the waves will cease.** They have seen Jesus do that before – they need to learn and move on. And Peter begins to sink! His response is true ‘ Lord, save me!’ And like a drowning puppy, Jesus reaches out and lifts him up by the scruff of his neck. ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’ The words echo the earlier boat story, and two will hear them again after his resurrection in the road to Emmaus. As Jesus and Peter get into the boat, the storm dies down.

**The response of the disciples is spot on.** They fell down and worshipped him – no longer asking each other- who is this, that even the wind and waves obey him?, as they had done earlier; now, there is no doubt. This is truly the Son of God, this man in the boat with them. The next time that Matthew tells us that the disciples worshipped him is when Jesus appears after his resurrection in chapter 28 v17.

**The ship or boat was an early Christian** symbol of the church, surrounded by adversity but comforted by Jesus with them in their midst. But as one scholar says, a boat is not static – it is a vehicle to go somewhere. The story carries on in the chapter, with the disciples and Jesus ministering to those in need ‘on the other side’. So let’s leave walking on water to Jesus, and carry on, ministering to those in need ‘on the other side’.

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