

Sermon

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind,[b] he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

A few years ago I went for a walk in the hills in South Wales. It was a beautiful walk but as I was coming down a path near the end of the walk, I slipped and broke my ankle. Everything changed in a moment. The plans I had for the rest of my holiday had to change. I went to hospital and my car had to be found and driven to a safe place by a friend. Another friend came and collected me from hospital to drive me home in my own car.

Other changes might not be so painful or traumatic but sudden change is often disturbing. Unsettling.

The Coronavirus has shown us how much things can be turned upside down. Who would have expected at the start of this year that life could be so different? Many people have suffered terrible sadness and loss. All of us have seen life change out of our control. We thought we knew where our lives were going and then everything changed. I wonder what we will look back at about this time. I wonder whether we will recognise that some good changes were there amongst the bad.

For the disciples of Jesus in our Gospel reading, life would have been a bit of a roller-coaster. Following Jesus must have been constantly full of changes, but they were learning to live with the surprises.

In the passage, the group had been with Jesus as he miraculously fed a huge crowd of people. But now they had left him behind and were out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. For some of them it was a change back to the way things used to have been. Their old life of fishing on that lake had changed in an instant when they left it to follow Jesus. They would have been familiar with the conditions and the likelihood of bad weather in that place.

And that is how it was that evening. We read that they were struggling with the wind against them. There isn't actually anything in the passage that suggests that they couldn't manage but I expect it felt a long way from the experience of the day with Jesus. He wasn't there and they were struggling to make progress. It went on like this for hours until it began to become light.

Suddenly they saw what looked like a person walking on the sea. I imagine hard to make out in the spray and dim light. Whoever and whatever it was, it was scary and the disciples cried out in fear. But it wasn't a ghost as they thought.

It was Jesus' voice that called out "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid". Words that changed everything.

Take Heart, it is I, do not be afraid.

Finding that Jesus is there in the middle of a time of struggle can change everything. We will come back to think a bit about that in a minute.

But it is the very next word that Jesus speaks in this story that I want to talk about first.

Jesus says "Come".

He is speaking to his friend Peter. Peter was excited to recognise Jesus standing on the sea and called out "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water".

So Jesus simply says "come".

And we read that Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water too and he started out across the waves towards Jesus.

It sounds as if he nearly got all the way to Jesus but Peter became frightened when he became aware of the strong wind. Perhaps he was distracted and couldn't hold on to the belief that Jesus could help him to do it. Peter began to sink in the water and cried out "Lord, save me". Immediately Jesus reached out and caught Peter, preventing him from sinking and helped him back to the boat.

Some theologians seem to think of this incident as a sign of frailty and failure by Peter.

However, I think that the story is much more positive than that. Peter was the one who took the step of faith to get out of the boat and Peter did experience the miracle as a result.

I cannot imagine that Jesus' words "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" was said as a rebuke to Peter. It seems to me far more likely that it was said with a smile of encouragement.

A couple of chapters later in Matthew's Gospel we find Jesus describing Peter as a rock upon which God would build the church. We know from the rest of the Gospels that Peter was far from perfect, even then.

God isn't looking for perfect people to use in the Kingdom. God builds the church from people like Peter. Imperfect people who occasionally fail and falter.

People ready to ask for miracles.

And people prepared to respond when Jesus says "come".

If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat.

I wonder what Jesus is saying to us as a church in these strange times.

What change is God asking us to make?

I wonder whether Jesus is saying "come" to any one of us today. A word of encouragement to take the step of faith.

Perhaps the chance to change everything is with us if we only realise who it is that is calling us to take the first step. And that it is the same one who says "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid"

I pray that as individuals and as a church, we will understand where it is that God is challenging us and that we will be like Peter, ready to ask and ready to respond. We may find ourselves occasionally sinking but it is then too that we will feel the hands of Jesus holding us tight.

We will be able to say, like the Psalmist "When I said my foot is slipping, your loving-kindness, O Lord, held me up" (Psalm 94:18)

But what about those times when we don't perceive Jesus to be close and when we do not hear his encouragement to step out in faith?

When, at the end of this same Gospel, Jesus was about to return to be with God, it could have felt like the lake all over again for the disciples. Being left alone again. A change none of them wanted to face.

Jesus promised at that time "... remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age". (Matthew 28:20)

The risen Jesus promised to be with his friends always. That is a promise that is good for us today just as it was then.

I don't know why it is that we all experience periods in life when it feels that God is far away from us. But remembering Jesus' promise should encourage us to look out for the evidence that Jesus has not left us alone.

The lake did not keep Jesus from his friends then and I believe that nothing can keep us separated from God's love now either.

The apostle Paul wrote this to the Christians in Rome: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I think we need to remember that. Jesus is never far away from us, despite what we feel.

I think that we need to actively look to find God.

Practice looking for God in your life each day. When you read the Bible, listen for what it is that Jesus has to say to you. Make a change for yourself; make it a habit to recognise God in the world around and the people you meet. And in times when we feel God is far away, perhaps these are just the times when we need to step out in faith, be prepared to put ourselves, like Peter, into the hands of Jesus rather than to cling on to the boat.

If you want to walk on water you have to get out of the boat.

When the times of struggle come, we can find Jesus to be closer than we could have imagined. If you can't see him, why would you not look? Take a risk if you need to. Shout out and demand to be heard. Jesus is there ready to catch you if you start to sink.

Ready to say to us "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid."

Amen