

Welcome

Hi and welcome to St Ninian's Church in Stonehouse.

My name is Stewart and it's my privilege to be the minister here.

I hope that you are blessed by our time together today as we explore another story from Matthew's Gospel where some very strange things happen.

Matthew 14:22-33 (NRSV)

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, 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.'

Sermon

One of the things we're supposed to do together is ask 'what if?' and that's what I'm going to do today.

Every sermon I've ever heard and preached about this strange event, this moment where Jesus comes walking on the water and Peter gets out of the boat and does the same for a moment, have always been about having enough faith or enough courage to get out the boat and try to walk on the water.

In fact, in another place today, in a service for the United Reformed Church that's exactly the sermon that I preach. If you want that sermon then I've posted the links on our facebook page.

But as I said, I want to pull on a different thread today and see where it leads.

Matthew has just told us the story of the feeding of the 5,000. That was last week's message and you can watch or listen on the website if you missed it. But it's worth us reminding ourselves just now

that when everyone was fed
it was an echo back to another point in the story of the people,
their time in the wilderness
when they wandered around for 40 years.

Jesus feeding the people is a reminder of the time where God provided manna, bread
from heaven, so the people wouldn't go hungry... and so they would learn to rely on God.
And it's a moment where they and we should say
ah... that means that Jesus is God!!!
How else would he be able to do that?

So, if today's story is a continuation of that thought
then perhaps this water escapade isn't about what we think it is.

Jesus has finally got some peace.
His cousin John had been executed,
he spent the day healing people,
being moved to his guts with compassion.
Then he fed everyone with 5 loaves and 2 fish.
And now the crowds have gone home
and he has sent his friends away in the boat.
They are heading back to the other side,
back to the villages where they live.

Early in the morning the wind has got up
and the boat is being smashed by the waves
and through the gloom and the spray
the disciples see a figure...
walking on the water.

They have a perfectly normal reaction to that...
They are terrified!
Who wouldn't be.

Jesus speaks to them... do not be afraid.
But Peter wants confirmation.
Lord, if it is you,
command me to come to you on the water.'
Jesus said, 'Come.'

Jesus says 'come'...
I've always read that as 'ok, sure, out you get...'

But this is one of those moments where the translators made a choice.
The greek word used means something much more like
em... if you like... if you're sure... it's up to you...

And for me that's enough to make me wonder...

Just yesterday Jesus was in full 'God mode',
making food for everyone,
manna in the wilderness.

Now he's doing another thing that God does,
passing by.

It happens to Adam and Eve in the garden.
They hear God walking in the garden,
passing by.

It happens to Moses.
God places Moses in a gap in the rocks
and then God passes by.

Passing by is a close encounter with God.

And here is Jesus... passing by
walking on the water,
being all god-like... again,
just like yesterday,
but different.

If the feeding of the 5,000 is a reminder
about who God is
and that the people should remember
to rely only on God
then why isn't this story about the same thing?
After all this is a continuation of that same story.

Peter's request is usually seen as a passionate desire
to be where Jesus is,
doing what Jesus does,
whatever the cost.
But why should he be where Jesus is and doing what Jesus does?
What if this,
rather than being a story about Peter taking a chance,
stepping out in faith,
is actually a story about Peter failing completely to recognise who Jesus is?

Let me explain...

The wanderings of the people of Israel in the wilderness last for 40 years because they just don't seem able to trust in God and follow some pretty basic rules. God gives them 10 rules, 10 commandments to help them live well together. As they develop their relationship with God they work out how those rules should be applied and add more to help cover some of the other parts of their lives.

One of those rules appears in a story near the beginning of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is alone in the wilderness for 40 days...

In chapter 4 we read that Jesus is taken to the top of the temple
and challenged to jump off
because the angels will save him.
Jesus response is no...

you shouldn't put God to the test.

It's one of the failings of the people of Israel in the wilderness...

They are always asking God to show them he is real.

Show us a sign.

Give us food.

Give us water.

Stop us getting sick.

Give us somewhere to live.

Help us win a battle.

Jesus passes the test...

but I'm not sure Peter does,

at all.

Lord, if it's really you, command me to come to you on the water.

That sounds like a test to me.

If it's really you.

I'm not sure.

At least not 100%.

I have doubts.

I need confirmation.

If you just tell me to come out onto the water with you

then I'll believe.

Jesus response is 'come'.

em... if you like

if you're sure.

It's up to you...

It's more of a question than an invitation.

It's the kind of thing a parent says to a child
when they know the child is about to make a bad choice.

That whatever they want to do

isn't going to go well

but they need to experience for themselves

so they can learn from it...

em... if you like... if you're sure... it's up to you...

And Peter gets out of the boat

and for a moment he is doing it.

And then he starts to sink because he is afraid.

Peter is exactly what Jesus has told him not to be...

do not be afraid...

And as Jesus picks him up

and puts him back in the boat

he leans in:

'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

I've always read that as
'if only you had believed more
you would have been able to walk on the water
just like me.'

But I'm not sure that's what Peter is getting a row for.

Peter didn't believe in Jesus in the first place.
If it's really you...
Sinking was just confirmation of that.

The day before the disciples had witnessed something amazing,
the feeding of 12,000 or so people,
but perhaps they did what we did last week.

Perhaps they explained it away as people sharing their food,
not even taking the time to think through
the implications of that change of heart,
the lessons from it,
that to be moved by the need of your neighbour
is what Jesus asks of us
right at the start of Matthew's gospel
in what we call the Beatitudes.

The disciples,
those closest to him,
the ones who have seen and heard it all,
still don't really understand who Jesus is.
When he comes walking on the water
their first response should have been the one they get to eventually...
'Truly you are the Son of God.'

But it's not.
They are afraid.
And Peter blurts out a test,
a test he thinks is for Jesus,
but it's really a test for himself...
and he fails it... miserably.

Jesus gets in the boat and the storm stops.
And they realise what they should have known all along...
'Truly you are the Son of God.'
Even the wind and the waves obey him...
But how else would he have been walking on the water?

Matthew's gospel is all about the identity of Jesus,
revealing to us bit by bit who he is.
God,
here,
beside us,
like us,
but not us.

We take that journey of discovery along with the disciples,
seeing what they see,
catching glimpses here and there,
wondering,
slowly understanding,
coming to our own conclusions in our own time.

Peter should have stayed in the boat
and not been afraid.
That's what he was asked to do.

If he had just believed,
believed when Jesus first appeared walking on the water
believed when he was told not to be afraid.
believed that Jesus was the Son of God

It's a hard lesson
when you think you know better,
when you think you can do something you can't,
when you think you can be something or someone you're not.

em... if you like... if you're sure... it's up to you...

It's a lesson we are all invited to learn,
again and again and again.

The temptation is to try to be like God,
to do the things that God can do,
to take on what is God's.

Perhaps the lesson here for Peter,
and for us,
is to recognise when God shows up,
to listen to what God says to us,
and to believe that we do not need to be afraid,
even when the storms of life threaten to overwhelm us.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

You come to us early in the morning;
wind howling, waves crashing,
the world unravelling around us.

You come to us walking on the water,
proclaiming peace when
we feel anything but peaceful.

Somewhere in our fear,
in our limited understanding,
we decided that we
must be water-walkers

to earn your love.

Forgive us when we step out of the boat
to test ourselves,
to test you,
to shore up our faith,
our egos, our fear.

You do not call us out
to test our faith,
you call us out in love,
to be love
and you are ever by our side.

Comfort us
when the waves rock the boat.

Steady us
when the wind is up, and our guard is down.

Challenge us to live our faith
from grace's perspective
knowing you match our steps,
stride by stormy stride.

When uncertainty and incivility crash and blow us about,
and we choose the immediacy of partisan politics over the
pastoral patient presence of your kingdom.

Call your peace to us, God,
over the wind and waves.

As hidden hurricanes lay waste to our souls
while, outwardly, we stroll in the eye of the storm.

Walk with us, God,
through the wind and waves.

In the threatening threshold of dawn's uncertainty
may your voice roll upon the waters
filling our hearts with peace
and our heads with courageous kindness.

Unlink our courage and commitment
from our need for success.

Disconnect the assurance of your incarnation
from the perfection of our faith.

Make us bold in our loving,
less afraid of failure,
and more accepting

of the dynamic dance
of faith and doubt;
wind and waves;
life and eternity.
Amen.
Amen.