

## Reflection - Sunday 9th August Jesus Walks on Water - Matthew 14:22-33

### Prayer

If you were at worship last week or have watched the reflection video during the week you'll know that last Sunday we looked at the middle part of Matthew 14 and the account of Jesus feeding the 5000+. Matthew 14 has within in three stories and they are all connected to each other. The first is the story of the death of John the Baptist, then the story of the feeding of the 5000+ and finally the story of Jesus walking on the water.

Like the feeding of the 5000+ the account of Jesus walking on water is told in more than one Gospel, although not all of them like the feeding of the multitude. Luke doesn't record the account of Jesus walking on the water. The other difference between the gospels is that Matthew is the only gospel who records Peter walking on the water, the rest just recording Jesus' walking on water.

The common thread that connects the account of Jesus feeding the 5000+ and the account of Jesus walking on water is Jesus' desire to be on his own. Following the death of John the Baptist Jesus wants to go off on his own to a solitary place, in the account of the feeding of the 5000+ we learn that the crowd follow him and Jesus has compassion on them. Today we hear that before Jesus dismisses the crowd he sends the disciples off in a boat to the other side, verse 34 tells us they land at Gennesarat. I sort of smile and think that maybe Jesus sent the disciples off first to make sure they went and don't hang around to chat after the crowd have gone! Having sent the disciples and dismissed the crowd Jesus is able to go off on his own, up on a mountainside to pray, we learn in verse 23.

It is whilst the disciples are in the boat and Jesus is praying that the storm rises. In the morning, so not immediately, Jesus walks out on the water to help the disciples, to save them from the storm which is still raging. Just like the feeding of the 5000+ and like many of the other miracles Jesus' miraculous actions come about in order that Jesus can respond to a practical need, calming the storms, feeding the multitude, turning water into wine. Jesus responds to the needs of the people around him, reaches out to them in a very practical yet miraculous way. He doesn't offer miracles to show off or to be seen but in response to the needs of those around him.

The account of Jesus and Peter walking on water has many many layers to it and there are many sermons you can preach from it and many a book has been based on it, not least John Ortberg's book about the need to importance of getting out of the boat.

Today though I want to focus on just two verses which I was drawn to as I prepared this week and which I believe speaks to our current pandemic situation. They are verses 29 & 30:

*'Come' he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me'.*

I don't know about you but the last few months have felt like a long storm, we entered lockdown on 23rd March, many of us to some extent a week before that, we closed the doors of our church buildings, we saw shops close and a life like we had never seen before began to shape around us. This pandemic life has been storm like, lots of waves buffeting us, lots of uncertainty surrounding us, lots to make us wonder what on earth is going to happen to us. Lockdown has been like being in the boat with the waves all around us.

Through the storm of COVID-19 though there is one thing we have been confident of, that God is with us and more than that God is our strength and refuge. The words of Psalm 46 '*God is our strength and refuge an ever present help in times of trouble*', have been ones I have come back to again and again during lockdown and have brought me great comfort.

I also believe strongly that throughout lockdown many people have found a greater connection with God. It's always hard to talk generally to a group of people as there will always be someone who feels differently or for whom things have been different. But overall from the conversations I've been having and the reading I have done people have made more time for God or connected with God afresh. We hear testimonies of people who've always wondered about faith and have found time to watch services, stories of people who with less travelling to work or dashing around have been able to make more space to pray and read scripture. We know that here on Trinity Zoom we have had a much more consistent and regular attendance at worship as people haven't been travelling as much and in the last month or so when they have been travelling they have been able to connect into worship from wherever they are.

This has been a real encouragement to me and I hope it has to you. I hope you have stories and testimonies not just of how God has been present through lockdown but how you have drawn closer to God and depended your relationship with him over these last few months.

We might want to say that as we emerge from lockdown we are stepping out into the storm, in the same way that Peter stepped out of the boat to walk on the water. But I don't think the story parallels quite like that, sometimes we have to look into the different layers of the scriptures to see how they map onto our own situations.

For me in many ways I feel lockdown has been a bit like the Peter moment, as we might call it, in v29, the storm is raging around him and has been raging around us, touching some of us directly, but whereas Peter fixes his eyes on Jesus as he steps out of the boat I think during lockdown, whilst we have been in the boat if you like, we have had our eyes focussed on Jesus. It is this focussing on Jesus which has held us and kept us upright through the storm. Yes there have been moments when the spray of the storm has touched us but we've been able to focus on God and to keep upright. I recognise many of you will have days when it hasn't felt like you've been upright but I think if we look back over the last 4 to 5 months overall we can say with confidence that God has kept us upright and kept us focussed despite the storm around us.

If the image of lockdown is that the storm has been out there but we have been lockdown inside away from the storm, in the boat, focussed on Jesus, then at the moment for most of us the image is changing. We are no longer in enforced lockdown, we can travel, go shopping, eat in a restaurant. Whilst we can do all these things of course the storm is still raging, COVID-19 is not over and those of us who have relatives who live in areas currently under local lockdowns know that only too well.

It feels to me that now we are out in the storm, walking amongst the waves, maybe even walking on the water - although I've yet to manage that yet! We are trying to find our way and making sure we are not getting caught by the biggest waves.

Like Peter though, once we step out into the waves, once we are amongst the waves rather than looking at them from inside, it's much easier to be distracted by them, if it is much easier to become afraid. When Peter saw the wind, he was afraid and began to sink. If we are not careful as we emerge from lockdown and live much more amongst the waves we too will become afraid, we too may sink all the more easily. We may need to shout 'Lord, save me' which of course we know with confidence God will.

Please don't get me wrong, I don't believe we should all still be in a complete lockdown, being out and about, able to see family, meet up with friends - all at an appropriate social distance - is incredibly important for our community, for our wellbeing, for our mental health.

The reality though, is that there are only 24 hours in the day and as we are out and about much more we cannot do all the things we managed to do in the early days of lockdown. We all need to make decisions about what we have time and don't have time to do. We have talked regularly over the last few months about post lockdown life having a blank sheet which we can write our new patterns of life into. Now is that time, the time when we have the opportunity to make the decisions we want about what life looks like. To decide what looks the same and what looks different to the end of March.

Within those decisions we each have a choice to make about our own pattern of worship, prayer and scripture. We each need to ask the question how can I continue to be have a regular rhythm of worship with my church community, how can I continue to have a regular rhythm of prayer, how can I ensure I read the scriptures regularly. If we don't have these things in our lives then we will be much more easily be distracted by the waves around us and far more easily loose our focus on Jesus. As Christians a regular rhythm of corporate worship with our brothers and sisters in Christ and a regular rhythm of reading the scriptures and personal prayer is absolutely essential to our wellbeing, absolutely essential to remaining focussed on God, absolutely essential to not getting distracted by the waves around us. For many of us these have become a greater and more regular part of our lives during lockdown as we've had more time. As we rework our diaries and patterns as we are emerging for lockdown I believe they need to continue to have that extra focus and consistency to them that they have had, for many people, through lockdown. If you are someone

who has struggled to find these rhythms during lockdown emerging from lockdown still gives you the opportunity to build them into your pattern of life.

These rhythms of personal and corporate worship and prayer fill us up, renew us, resources us, give us energy for the world, they are like putting fuel in our car. When we then go out into the storm of life - whether it feels stormy or joyful - that fuel which we have put in enables us to live, and face whatever comes at us, focussed on Jesus. If we stop putting the fuel in, we stop being able to focus well.

Think about if your car starts to run out of fuel, that moment when the fuel warning light comes on. How easy it is to be distracted by the fuel gauge and thinking about whether you'll run out of fuel or rather than being completely attentive to the road. We need the fuel of corporate worship, scripture and prayer to enable us to stay focussed on Jesus in the stormy world that we live in. A world which is even more stormy with COVID-19 than it was before, where the waves are even bigger. If we fall out of a regular rhythm of worship, prayer and scripture we will easily become like Peter distracted by the waves, afraid and start to sink.

Of course worship, prayer and scripture are not always easy, making time for them both corporately and personally is a sacrifice - but one I think is entirely reasonable for God to ask us to make. In his book *Domestic Monastery*, which I am reading at the moment, Ronald Rolheiser says this:

*These is only one negotiable rule for prayer [and I would add worship and scripture]: "Show up, Show up Regularly!" The ups and downs of our minds and hearts are of secondary importance.*

I think there is a lot of wisdom in that. So as we move into a new phase of pandemic life over the next few weeks, as we all start to form new patterns, timetables and rhythms I encourage us all to place as the foundation of those patterns a life of worship, prayer and scripture which will keep you focussed on Jesus. Whether you feel during lockdown this is something which has changed for you or not, whether you feel you had an A+ rhythm and pattern of prayer before lockdown or it is something you've always struggled with. This foundation is important for us all, it is good to be reminded of it's importance and now is as good a time as ever to review your foundation, to develop good patterns of worship, prayer and scripture and check your pattern is what it needs to be for you to live focussed on Jesus.

I encourage you think about making regular corporate worship with the Trinity family, in person or on zoom a priority. I encourage you to find a time that works for you too regularly, ideally daily, to read the Bible and pray. I encourage you to consider who might hold you accountable for your life of faith and if that feels alien to you watch out for more information on the Methodist Way of Life in the autumn, which I'm really excited about, and can help us all to grow in mission and discipleship in an accountable way.

I encourage you to do these things because they are what roots us as Christians with God, what enable us to be compassionate and to work in partnership with God as we talked about last week,

they are what enable us to offer ourselves to God and to be used by God so more people know of his saving love.

And incase for a moment you think I'm preaching this sermon having this all sorted I share these words of Stephen Cotterall, the New Archbishop of York, in the recent book on ministry [Priesthood]:

*Every sermon [we] preach must first be preached to [ourselves]. If it doesn't address the cancer in our soul, if it doesn't convert us, if it doesn't challenge us to rise up and follow in the path of discipleship then it won't heal convert or challenge anyone else.*

I share these words today because I know I have to make sure that the good rhythms of worship, prayer and scripture that I've been able to establish in lockdown continue to be the foundation for my discipleship as I go forward. I know already as I am out and about more they've not been as consistent as they were a month ago. This passages convicts me to address this, to make sure my foundations are right and in offering this reflection I hope they convict you to do the same.

All I am encouraging us to do though should not feel like a burden but a joy. For making space for God and God's love in our lives is a joy, a blessing, time with God should be restoring and renewing times. Can I encourage you that if it feels like a burden share with others about that in your house group, friendship group, with me or others in Church and work together on your pattern of worship, prayer and scripture being a joy and not a burden.

*Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me'.*

Like Peter, without a doubt at the moment, we continue to live life in a storm but like Peter we have the opportunity to live it focussed on Jesus, with Jesus as the centre. When we live focussed on Jesus we are able to remain upright and supported. To live with Jesus at the centre though we need to put the fuel of faith into us so that we can remain focussed on God, serve each other and the world, grow deeper with God and help others to do the same. The foundation of that fuel is and always will be worship, prayer and scripture, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So I encourage you to put these firm foundations in place for the months and years ahead. I pray that you will be blessed anew by the spirit of God through worship, prayer and scripture, encouraged by the presence of Jesus and enabled by the Father to live faithful and holy lives, maybe even to walk on water, do send us a video!