Trinity 9 Zoom 2020

Matthew 14: 22-23

*Walking on water*

There are witticisms based on our gospel story. The monastery with a sign on its lake saying, "Do **not** walk on the water." The book with the title, 'If you want to walk on water you have to get out of the boat'. And Herod, in the musical Jesus Christ Superstar, taunting Jesus to walk across his swimming pool.

Tom Wright’s commentary on Matthew's gospel, notes there’s only one picture of this scene painted by Conrad Witz in 1444. Jesus is a shimmering figure walking across the water, and Peter, sinking as he walks towards him. Perhaps devout artists avoid it because it portrays Peter, the great apostle, in a bad light. But Tom Wright says he finds this encouraging. It rings true to the Christian experience. It depicts the life of faith. Or rather the life of half-faith - faith mixed with fear and doubt, typical of many of us, as with the disciples.

The Early Church, especially in Rome, faced persecution at the time the Gospels were written, and so stories of a hostile sea, the danger of perishing, and indeed, Peter drowning, were to strengthen the resolve of the Christian community. Today it resonates with refugees who risk everything by trusting themselves to the waves. With those in Beirut whose lives have been torn apart. And with us as we walk on the water of a virus from which we need rescuing.

Picture the disciples in the boat, weathering a terrible storm. After feeding five thousand people, Jesus sends them ahead of him while he goes off to pray on his own. He's tried before to have time alone with God but the crowd’s needs force him to give them his attention. He needs time to reflect on all that's happening; John the Baptist’s death, his own life and ministry. When Jesus re-joins his disciples, he finds their boat rocking, the waves churning, and they’re frightened. Even more frightened when they see his ghostly figure walking across the water towards them.

Having been reassured by Jesus that it’s him and not a ghost, Peter calls out, "If it really is you, then tell me to come to you over the water." Why does Peter say this to Jesus? What's he doing? It sounds as if he's testing Jesus, like us saying to a friend, "If you really love me then make me do this impossible task."

Jesus’ response is: "Come on, then!" There's no way out now. Peter takes a few steps towards Jesus and then it hits him. What's he doing? This is crazy! The water can't possibly be holding him up. Rationally he knows he ought to be sinking. And as these doubts make him panic and take his eyes off Jesus, he does just that - he starts to sink and shouts out in terror for Jesus to save him. And, of course, Jesus reaches out to him straightaway.

Before we think how this story works for us as individuals, let's think of it as a picture of our world. We're like the disciples in the boat. They've seen so much of Jesus' power. They've heard his teaching and prayed his prayer. But now, even though they're professional fishermen, they're having difficulties. Struggling with their oars and sails, they're not making any headway against the wind. We too have learned much, invented much, and yet are still unable to do many of the things that really matter. We've invented machines for making war, but nobody has yet found one to make peace. We can put machines into space, but we can't put food into hungry mouths. And there, shimmering on the water is a strange figure walking towards us.

Many people know a little bit about Jesus. But he seems a ghostly figure, not connected to their problems. Some find him frightening. Others wish he’d go away and leave them alone. Even those who believe in him, as the disciples do, don't know what to expect from him. But sometimes he seems to do the impossible and we think it would be a good idea to emulate him. So, we set off to copy him and start to bring his love and power, his peace and hope to this needy world.

But then we look down and see the waves and become frightened; on our own against the elements. That's what it can feel like when we try to bring God's love and healing power into the storms of the world. That's when we need to hear Jesus' words. They're a combination of rebuke and encouragement. Is this how much faith you have? Why all this doubt? The moment when we're most strongly tempted to give up is probably the moment when help is just a hand-reach away. This is what Matthew’s Gospel is all about – from the beginning - Emmanuel – God with us - and at the end Jesus telling his disciples he will be with them always.

As far as we know, walking on water, despite the jokes, wasn't something the early Christians expected to do. Paul, when he was shipwrecked, didn't get out of the boat and walk to the shore. So, it's likely Matthew expects his readers to hear this story in terms of their own journey of faith - and their own struggles with doubts.

So, how do we find the courage to continue in a [world pandemic like Covid](https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-53661262), or after a man-made disaster like [the explosion in Beirut](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/08/alive-survivors-recount-beirut-explosion-200804175426591.html)? Sometimes all we can do is take a leap of faith. But then maybe, like Peter, we panic when we find ourselves in at the deep end! Sailors can call on [the RNLI](https://rnli.org/) to come to their aid; Christians can call on God, and each other.

Who do we turn to when we need rescuing? How can we encourage each other to hold on to hope and keep faith, when we find yourselves overwhelmed?

Because there are times when Jesus asks us to do what seems impossible. How can we possibly do what he's called us to do? How can we even think about telling others about Jesus when we're not sure about him ourselves? How can we start to develop a serious prayer life when our own lives are disordered?

Of course, if we only look at the waves being lashed in the wind then we’ll think it's impossible. What we’re meant to do - it's basic and obvious, but hard to do in practice - is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and our ears open for his encouragement. And be ready to do what he says even if it seems crazy. Trusting Jesus is done by concentrating on him and his love. He wants us to put our total trust in him. To keep our minds on him and then all the things that make us afraid and insecure won’t let us sink. We’ll be able to walk straight over them, confident in his love and power. I