

“WALKING ON THE WATER (Mark 21)”

Mark 6:45-56

What is life? A bowl of cherries? A cabaret, my friend? A minestrone, served up with parmesan cheese? Something you do when you can't get to sleep? A seventy year adventure of unalloyed joy spent in praise and worship of God? I think, if we're honest, most of us find it a long, hard grind. We all face our times of crisis and rejoice in fleeting moments of happiness and peace, but anyone who thinks that the words of Helen Steiner Rice or Patience Strong adequately encapsulate the philosophy of the vast majority of humanity needs to wake up and open their eyes.

For most of us, what happens day by day is not necessarily dangerous or life-threatening or particularly depressing: it's just hard, frustrating work. There's an awful lot to push against – deadlines, targets, routines, people we just don't get on with, situations that drain us of energy and enthusiasm – nothing we can really put our finger on, but everything's a bit of a drag, like trying to swim through porridge. Where's the help for us? How are we to cope, to get to the stage where we're “*living life in all its fullness*” as Jesus promised we would? Some of you, whose lives might be a continuous expression of ecstatic experience of the presence of Christ are starting to wonder what's up with the preacher this week, but I reckon I probably speak for more people than I don't when I say that life can be a drag.

The reading we have just had from Mark's story of the life and ministry of Jesus contains a wonderful metaphor for life. Jesus' friends, his inner core of disciples and confidants, are out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Earlier in the evening they have had the exceptional experience of seeing Jesus provide enough food for more than five thousand people from just five bread rolls and a couple of fish. The crowd have been sent home and Jesus has taken himself off for a few hours of peace and quiet to pray up in the hills. As he left them, he told them he'd meet them in Bethsaida. He'd make his own way there and they were to take the boat in which they'd crossed the lake the day before.

As they set off across the lake there blows up a strong head wind. There's no point putting up the sail, so they row – and it's jolly hard work! For them it's familiar territory: they know the lake, they know the weather conditions, they know this isn't a dangerous storm or anything like that – but it's a real struggle to make any headway. This is nothing to do with the cost of obedience to Jesus or the sacrifice of being a disciple: it would be the same for anyone rowing across the lake that evening. It's just that it's a real pig trying to make any progress. It's a picture of life for most of us: hard, frustrating, slow and wearisome. And I don't mean that kind of anodyne “picture of life” that Alan Bennett sent up so brilliantly in *Beyond The Fringe*: “*You know Life – Life is rather like opening a tin of sardines. We are all of us looking for the key. Some of us – some of us think we've found the key, don't we? We roll back the lid of the sardine tin of Life, we reveal the sardines, the riches of Life therein, and get them out, we enjoy them. But, you know, there's always a little piece in the corner you can't get out. I wonder – I wonder, is there a little piece in the corner of your life? I know there is in mine.*”

Jesus, as we've said, is off praying on his own up in the hills above the lake. As it gets dark, he can see in the moonlight the little boat making its painfully slow progress across the lake. It's not terribly precise in Mark's account of their trip at what time Jesus sees them, but he does say that it is “*evening*”. Even if we allow that evening might extend until midnight, it's not until the “*fourth watch of the night*” that Jesus decides to go and help them – that's some time between 3am and 6am. In other words, Jesus waits *at least* three hours before trying to intervene. He allows them to struggle along for all that time (it could conceivably have been up to eight hours).

And then he walks out over the water to them. It clearly wasn't to rescue them as they weren't in any danger. Fair enough, it was hard work, but it certainly wasn't a situation that could be seen as life threatening. And did you notice what Mark says about him as he gets into the middle of the lake? – “*He was about to pass them by.*” Why on earth should Jesus do that? Was he maybe just taking a short cut

across the lake? It's something I've often wished I could do when I've been in a hurry and have had to walk all round Stowe Pool. It would be so much easier just to wander across the surface of the lake that have to go all the way round. As Jesus refused to use his divine power for his own ends when tempted by the Devil, I'm sure he wouldn't have been doing that here. Was he perhaps making a point? Almost certainly – or we wouldn't have had it included in our Bibles. But what point was he making?

I think he was probably wanting to stress his own divinity. In Matthew's account of this story, we read that after the big picnic, the people wanted to make him king. Jesus refused that option because it was not part of his mission and calling: it would have been a very human way of trying to solve the problems that confronted the people of Israel at that time. Now he is emphasising that he is not only fully human, but fully God too. There are places in the Old Testament, in the Scriptures that these people would have read, where we find references to God putting his footsteps on the waters (*Job 9:8; Psalm 77:19*).

And when Jesus calls out to them and says, "*It is I*", it's not that annoying introduction so many people give you on the 'phone – "Who is it?" "It's me!" (Of course it's me, but who's "me"?). He says in Greek "*Εγώ εἰμι*", the Greek translation of the words God uses to introduce himself to Moses when he talks to him out of the burning bush – "*I am who I am*". This is Jesus' way of explaining to the disciples, of demonstrating to them in a rather elaborate object lesson that, even in the frustrations of life, God can be found.

But do the disciples recognise that? Do they heck? I sometimes wonder why Jesus wasn't a bit more direct with them: why did he have to make it all so complicated? Presumably to keep generations of scholars and preachers in work (although they'd probably still spend a lot of time explaining away the bits of the Bible that are dead obvious but a bit tricky to put into practice!). Anyway, these disciples, out there in the middle of the lake and the middle of the night – men who had only a few hours before experienced the amazing miracle of the loaves and fishes – see Jesus and are terrified. Now, fair enough, it's not a very common sight and they were probably pretty tired and a bit overwrought by the events of the previous evening, but look at what they attribute this apparition to – "*they thought he was a ghost*".

These men, the close followers of Jesus who have seen and experienced so much, suddenly start to believe that this is some kind of water spirit. It was a common belief amongst the fishermen of Galilee – and, no doubt, other places too – that there were spirits who inhabited the lake and if you saw one it was a harbinger of doom. The word translated "*ghost*" here can also be translated "*spirit*". Despite the things that these men had seen and heard already which seemed to authenticate the divinity of Jesus Christ, they were still more ready to believe in other, more superstitious, explanations than in him. While they're wittering away about spirits and ghosts, he tells them to pull themselves together and steps into the boat – at which point the wind dies down and they can make a bit more headway. No doubt they still had to row fairly hard to get to the shore, but it wasn't quite so frustrating as it had been. And when they arrived in the lakeside villages, the ministry of Jesus – healing and helping – continued as before.

So where's this all taking us, then? Well, avoiding, I hope, the Alan Bennett method of application, there's still a strong message here about God's work in our lives. Jesus brings the power of God into difficult situations. We look for Jesus and his power when things go wrong – particularly when they go wrong in a dramatic way – a serious illness, the end of a relationship, a bereavement or a sudden life change. But what about the rest of the time, when things aren't really going wrong in any spectacular way, but life is just getting a bit of a bore and there seems more drudgery than delight? Are we looking out for Jesus then? He's there, alright. He may be watching from a distance, he may seem to be taking a long time to get involved (probably because we haven't asked him to).

But what seems so sad to me very often is the way in which so many people – even those who consider themselves Christians – are quite prepared to believe that help can come from other sources, maybe supernatural sources, but don't consider the possibility that help could come from Jesus. Just as the disciples thought first of the water spirit rather than the person who'd just turned a lunchbox into a

banquet (as Mark himself comments in v52), so many people turn first to their horoscope or a spirit guide or some other weird and wonderful source of inspiration to help them in their life choices. I never fail to be amazed at the people who seem to be fairly intelligent and articulate who 'phone in to the Steve Wright Show on a Monday afternoon to ask the astrologer Jonathan Cainer whether they should get a new job or chuck their boyfriend or buy a new fridge. When he tells them they seem so pumped up by his answer, but I suspect they wouldn't give the time of day to someone who suggested that Jesus might be able to help them.

The thing is, you need to be keyed in to Jesus' agenda, to look at what he has to say in the Bible, to listen for the prompting of the Holy Spirit, to call out to him in prayer. And many of us are still not there yet. We would rather struggle along on our own or put our faith in some crackpot idea that can never really deliver as Jesus can. Life does not become a bowl of cherries or a cabaret with Jesus: it's still a tough haul, as the disciples found out when they had to keep rowing across the lake. But Jesus does help to lighten the load, to bring a bit of joy and a lot of serenity if you're prepared to let him.

I'd kind of decided not to preach about the development project again this morning – I've already suggested some passages you might like to read as you're thinking about your giving this week. But let me just close with this reflection. This development is going to be hard work in all kinds of ways and it will test our commitment to Christ and to each other over the next few months, I'm sure. But I am also sure – as I think many of you are – that this is God's will for us here and I believe Jesus will be with us in it. As we'll see next Sunday, in bringing to reality this vision of "*A church at the heart of the city*" we must not forget the second part of that vision – "*with Christ at the heart of the church*". It's his agenda we are following, so let's encourage each other with that, both corporately and individually.

Be encouraged that Jesus can be with you, bringing the power of the living God into your situation, helping you to cope with the ups and downs of life – but also helping you to cope with the long, boring, frustrating level sections, the plateaux when everything seems a drag and progress seem slow and burdensome. He's walking alongside your little boat now – look out for him and invite him in.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you find most difficult about life? Why?
2. Why do you think Jesus waited so long to help?
3. Why do people seem prepared to believe in almost anything other than Jesus?
4. Share any ways in which you have experienced the help of Jesus in your life.
5. What had the disciples "*not understood about the loaves*"?
6. What new thing have you learned from this story?