

“WHERE IS YOUR FAITH?”
Luke 8:22-25

Why are some stories classics and others just a waste of paper or breath? Why do some songs endure while others quickly become forgotten? Why are some plays and films such favourites with audiences for generations? Well, there are all kinds of reasons – catchy tunes, clever use of language, stunning photography, consummate performances. But if you ever listen to the cultural pundits on the late-night discussions on Radio 4 or BBC2, if you read the works of critics and commentators, they’ll tell you that the key to a timeless work of art is that it deals with universal issues, the kind of issue that touches everyone’s life at some point – not always, but often an issue of love or death.

We’ve just read a short extract from one of the great stories of literature and experience – the story of Jesus Christ. It’s preserved for us in four different forms in what we now call the Bible, four different perspectives and interpretations of the life of someone who – whatever your response to him – has had a more powerful effect on this world than anyone before or since. And that story of Jesus is part of the longer story of God’s relationship with humanity since the dawn of time.

In terms of the overall sweep of the story, this incident may appear to be fairly insignificant. It’s just a few sentences here in Luke’s version of events (although it’s repeated in both Matthew’s and Mark’s gospels). The events wouldn’t have taken very long to unfold. There’s no great plot development or characterisation. A small group of Jesus’ friends are ferrying him across the lake of Galilee in their boat. Fatigued by recent events, Jesus soon falls asleep in the back of the boat and as he lies there snoring, a powerful squall blows up and the boat seems to be on the point of going under. Having exhausted their options for dealing with it, the friends are left with the only alternative of trying to get Jesus to do something. They wake him up and he somehow manages to bring calm to the lake once more.

At the heart of this story, though – and at the heart of the gospels and of the whole Bible – is this one timeless and universal question which Jesus puts to his friends, probably in frustration: “*Where is your faith?*” It’s a question we all face time and time again. Where’s your faith? What or whom do you really trust? What’s the bottom line for you? But, as was the case with the men in the boat, we probably don’t really consider it until the moment of crisis. Life seems to be plodding along quite nicely, thank you, and we have no real need to confront such big issues. And then a sudden squall comes along, a storm blows up in our lives which leaves us wondering where to turn – or, to put it another way, asking ourselves where our faith is, what can we really trust when everything else seems to have proved pretty well worthless at helping us make sense of what’s going on.

You see, for these men in the boat, they had always taken it for granted where their faith was in everyday situations. They were men who lived by fishing on this lake: it was their daily livelihood. Every day they would be out in their boat, rowing or sailing across familiar waters, encountering the same people on the lake and on the shore. It was a life that seemed to chug along pretty well, without any intrusive questions about faith and all that kind of thing.

They might have replied to Jesus' question that their faith was in their resources – their boat and equipment. This was by no means the first storm they'd encountered on the lake, I'm sure, and until now their boat had been more than equal to the task. It was no doubt sturdy and had always been adequate for whatever had come their way. Now, though, it didn't seem quite as secure and they were left panicking about its ability to see them through the crisis. Suddenly it didn't look quite such a safe bet.

They might have replied that their faith was in their experience. As we've said, they'd been out on the lake many times before. Very probably they had been out in boats since before they were teenagers and they'd got to know all the customs and lore of the fishermen from an early age. We go on holiday to a fishing village in South Devon and it's amazing to watch the youngsters, who are obviously natives of the village, manoeuvring the boats around the little harbour. These men had learned to read the signs of the weather, to interpret the currents of the lake and the behaviour of the birds and other wildlife. They knew all about storms and what to do. But this time, things had got out of hand and their experience wasn't quite up to it. They no longer knew what to do.

They might have told Jesus that their faith was in each other. They all knew what to do and together they could pool their knowledge, experience and resources to overcome any difficulty. They'd probably worked together for many years. They knew each other's strengths and weaknesses. They had no doubt that they could pull through together. Except that this time it was different. Even their collective knowledge and experience let them down. They couldn't rely on sorting it out between them.

And so, in desperation – as a last resort – they turned to Jesus. They'd seen him do some clever things already and they had an inkling that he might be able to help. At this point in the story, they hadn't had very long with him, but they knew there was something a bit special about him. They certainly didn't fully understand who he was or what he represented. Luke tells us that in *v25b*. But they knew enough to trust him. They knew that the crisis was beyond their ability to deal with. They knew that there was something unusual about Jesus. They knew that the other things in which they'd always put their trust were not delivering on this occasion. They knew that they didn't really have any alternative. So they called out to him and asked him to help them. And he did – on this occasion and again and again as the rest of the story unfolded.

So how about you? Where is your faith? You may not be struggling with a crisis at the moment. The question is not one you care to address in your current circumstances. But you will encounter situations where it becomes the crucial question. On the other hand, you may be up to your eyeballs in problems and difficulties at the moment and you really could have done without coming along here this morning – whether you're a regular worshipper here or just here on an occasional visit.

You may reply that your faith is in your resources. You have all the financial cushion you need in order to overcome any crisis. You can buy your way out of anything. You've got property and cash to feel set up for the rest of your life. There's plenty in your pension fund. You've got the wherewithal to do whatever you want. O.K. Fair enough. But none of us is 100% sure of what the future's going to bring in terms of property prices, investment income – even of theft, burglary and embezzlement. But if that's where your faith is, fair enough.

Or maybe you are putting all your faith in your experience. You've got a good education. You've served a long time in your profession. You've got deep reserves of native wit and cunning. You've been through crises in the past and managed to cope. And then something entirely unexpected happens – something beyond your imaginings and beyond your experience. Where's your faith then? How will you cope with a set of circumstances that is just so desperate that you don't know where to turn?

Or are you dependent on other people? Your family, your colleagues, your neighbours, your friends? Can you really be sure they'll be there for you when you need them? There may well come a time when even their collective knowledge and wisdom is not up to coping. Where will your faith be then?

And how about the crisis that we will all have to face one day – the only thing that we can be really sure of (along with taxes, as George Washington once said): death? The time when we will all have to stand before our Creator and face him in his awesome glory. Where will your faith be then? It's maybe that prospect that so scared the fishermen on the lake – they thought their time was up and they were going to die.

Have you considered Jesus? You'd expect me to say that, wouldn't you? And you may well say that you have, but you have too many questions, there are too many things you don't understand, too many loose ends. Or you may be some long-serving and deeply religious Christian who resents the idea that Jesus might be used just as a last resort. Jesus had no difficulty with these men coming to him as a last resort. He didn't tell them that it was too late, they should have thought about all this earlier. He transformed their situation, just as he did for the woman with a haemorrhage who had tried all the doctors and

medicine men she could: just as he did for the man who had been sitting by the health spa for years and years waiting for something to happen: just as he did for the woman who had been hounded by the pious pillars of the community for her adulterous behaviour: just as he has for millions of people down through the centuries.

And these fishermen didn't really understand what was going on. They couldn't work out who he was or how he fitted into their worldview. They just believed that he could make a difference – and over the next couple of years they gradually learned more about him and were able to appreciate a little more about who he was and what he had come along to do. If you say you don't want to put your faith in Jesus until all your questions are answered, you'll never do it. None of us here would. I've spent nearly half my life reading and studying and thinking about Jesus and I still have as many questions as I did when I started – different questions maybe, but still questions. But I know enough to believe that it makes sense to trust him. Some great theologian – I think it might have been St Augustine – said *“I don't understand in order to believe: I believe in order to understand.”*

If you want to find out a bit more, then we have a new Alpha course starting soon – or you can come and have a word with me about how to go forward. But I simply want to leave that question of Jesus ringing in your ears this morning – *“Where is your faith?”* Have you ever really thought about it? One day, you'll need to know.