

**“FOLLOWING THE KING - 42”**

***Matthew 14:22-36***

This story is another well-known episode in the life of Jesus and one which, like so many others, has given rise to a kind of proverbial saying when we talk about someone who is pretty good at stuff as being able to “*walk on water*”. But it’s a story which seems to have a sense of urgency about it, while, at the heart of it, there’s a very curious lack of urgency. As we saw last week, Jesus has spent a whole day with the crowds of people who were following him, eager to hear his words of wisdom and anxious to have him heal their various illnesses, disabilities and diseases. So long were they with him that day, that he ended up having to provide tea for them from a couple fish and some rolls. James Hamilton, at the 11 o’clock service last week, very helpfully brought out the contrast between that and Herod’s birthday party described by Matthew in the first part of the chapter.

But it’s been a long day and Jesus is keen to get away, so Matthew tells us that “*Immediately*” Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and hurry off across the lake while he took a solitary stroll around the edge and used the opportunity to pray. I reckon that the boat was a decoy for the crowds, who assumed Jesus was in it and finally gave up the chase – a bit like those luxury limousines that leave the stage door of a rock concert, while the actual stars of the show go out the fire exit and leave in an old van.

As evening came, Jesus was up in the hills overlooking the lake while the disciples were in the boat well out on the water. Although Matthew doesn’t use the word “storm”, we read that the wind was against the boat and was pretty strong, “*buffeting*” the boat. These were experienced fishermen, used to being out on the lake in all weathers, and they were making very slow progress. It’s not really clear from this account how strong the wind was, and not clear, either, if the occupants of the boat were actually in any danger, but it would have been very hard work indeed trying to move over the water. If they were going into the wind, they may well have been having to use the oars, which would have been back-breaking work. In the minds of the people of Israel in Jesus’ day, the sea was linked with the idea of chaos and disorder, so there’s a very strong sense that things are not at all going to plan. And Matthew does manage to convey a sense of fear and foreboding in his words.

Presumably, even if Jesus couldn’t see the boat – it was getting dark and the boat was a long way out on the lake – he could tell there was a storm brewing and things would be difficult on the lake. So what does he do? He keeps on praying. In fact, from dusk (probably around 8 o’clock) until “*the fourth watch of the night*” – between 3 o’clock and 6 o’clock in the morning – he makes no move to help them. So the disciples were heaving away on the oars (and possibly over the side) for several hours before Jesus decided to do anything to help.

And how does he help? By quietening the wind? By calming the storm? No – he tried to help by wandering out across the lake to meet them. Jesus walks across the lake – across the storm, actually – demonstrating his superiority even over the elements, his mastery over nature. And the disciples spot him, but clearly can't make out that it is Jesus – it was still probably not light and there would have been a lot of spray and foam – so they are aware of a figure strolling over the waves out on the deepest part of the lake. That in itself is pretty scary, but fishermen on that lake in those days believed that evil spirits came from the lake, from the chaos that the lake represented in their mythology. They think they are seeing a spirit, a “ghost” as it's translated in our version of the gospel. No wonder they were terrified!

Jesus could have had a lot of fun with them, really, but he's not like that and the sense of urgency suddenly returns. “Immediately” he acts to allay their fears by shouting out over the roar of the wind, “Don't worry. It's only me. No need to be scared.” Except that the words he uses for “It is I” in Greek are “*Εγώ ειμι*”, which are the words used in the Greek version of the Old Testament to translate God's description of himself to Moses as “I AM”. Matthew, in using that phrase in this gospel written for the Jewish believers who made up his church, is once again identifying Jesus with the God of the people of Israel, the God of the Old Testament, the God who not only has mastery over nature, but created that nature in the first place.

Here is God, in the person of Jesus, with them in the time of crisis and telling them not to be afraid. Dick France writes that Jesus' words that they should “*Take courage ... are an assurance for those who have good reason for fear [as those disciples clearly did]; it does not indicate that the crisis is not real, but that in the presence of Jesus fear can be diminished.*” Jesus hasn't calmed the storm. He's joined them in it and brought reassurance by his very presence.

At this point Peter recognises him and wants to be out there with him. He's not laying down a challenge to Jesus when he says “*If it's you ...*” as if he wants confirmation. The force of that phrase in Greek is as we'd say in English, “*Oh well, if it's you, then ...*” or “*As it's you ...*” and he waits for Jesus to tell him to get out of the boat – which for Peter would be a reassurance that it's OK to leave the boat. And he has enough faith in Jesus to climb out of the boat and, as one writer puts it (Michael Green), “*join Jesus in his victory parade*”, walking on the storm.

But after the initial adrenaline rush, as he realises just what's going on and what he's let himself in for – as soon as he sees the wind – that faith gets mixed up with fear and doubt. This isn't normal. This shouldn't be happening. People don't walk on water. And he looks at the waves – and takes his eye off Jesus. A big mistake! The writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* writes at the beginning of chapter 12 that those who claim to follow him must “*keep their eyes fixed on Jesus*”. Peter doesn't. He focuses – quite

naturally, really – on the chaos that is whirling around him and he allows the material facts of the situation to outweigh the power of Jesus. He allows his experience and his own take on things to push into the background the miraculous power of Jesus, which he has seen in action in other ways only a few hours before.

So Matthew records that he shouts out to Jesus, “*Lord, save me!*” But notice *when* he cries out. Matthew notes that he calls to Jesus as he is “*beginning to sink*”. He doesn’t wait to try other options. He doesn’t give it a minute or two to see if he goes down any further. He’s desperate and calls out to Jesus first of all. Jesus is his first port of call in this particular storm. The urgency is back again. And Jesus responds “*immediately*” again. He grabs him and they somehow get themselves back into the boat with the others. At which point – after Jesus has joined his friends in the midst of the gale, after he has tested their faith and, particularly, Peter’s – at that point, the storm dies down. Jesus could have done that much earlier. Jesus could have done that from the hillside above the lake. Jesus could have saved his friends a lot of hassle and a lot of worry and a lot of fear. But he didn’t. He proved to them that their faith in him was justified because he was prepared to join them in their crisis, prepared to make his presence felt with them in the storm.

And then all the stuff about walking on the storm, calling out “*It is I*”, grabbing Peter as he started to sink, bringing calm to the lake again – it all starts to fall into place and the disciples acknowledge him – for the first time together – as “*the Son of God*”. There’s no doubt about that any more. And as they land at Gennesaret the work begins again with all those who have “*recognised Jesus*”. The people have recognised him as the miracle worker, the one who can come and make things right for them, the one who can come and heal and restore. The disciples are now privileged to recognise him as “*Truly the Son of God.*”

And he’s still the Son of God, still able to help us and restore us. We started off by mentioning the proverbial “walking on water”, and now we have another of those clichés with which our faith abounds. Jesus is with us in the storms of life. How often have we heard – used? – those words? But their well-worn usage doesn’t for one moment negate their truth. You might say it’s a lazy way to use imagery, but it’s also a very potent way. Just as for the disciples and their contemporaries, the sea and its unpredictability was seen as a metaphor for chaos (or for them, perhaps more literally a form of chaos), so the crises with which we are confronted can seem as if our lives are descending into chaos.

We all face challenges and problems. Like those Galilean fishermen, sometimes we know how to deal with them and sometimes we don’t. And when we don’t, we find Jesus there with us. He doesn’t necessarily take away the crisis or bring some kind of miraculous end to the difficulty. Sometimes it

might even get worse. But he's there with us, walking alongside us even when it seems pretty well impossible that he could. He's the master of everything – after all, he created it all and if it goes wrong he knows how to fix it.

And often, too, when he's with us in those times of crisis, he calls us to take a step of faith – as Peter did – to step out of the apparent security of the familiar and the comfortable, into the chaotic and the untested. And, as we do so, we are to keep our eyes fixed on him, the Kingly Messiah, whom we are learning to follow. Once you fix your eyes on Jesus, you can start to get things into perspective, to gain a sense of proportion. Looking at Jesus, you can see him as the Son of God – the Creator, the Redeemer, the Sustainer – and recognise his power and mastery. Of course, it's a risk – as it was for Peter. The boat was familiar. In Peter's experience, it has usually all eventually come good. The probably would have got them to the other side of the lake in the end. But what an adventure it was, taking Jesus at his word! Even when it started to go pear-shaped – especially when it started to go pear-shaped – Jesus was there to reach out and help.

The late Donald Coggan, one-time Archbishop of Canterbury, lived in his retirement in Winchester. Travelling home one evening on the train, he got into conversation with a man on the train and when they got off at Winchester to man said to Donald Coggan, "Well, goodbye. Take care." And Coggan replied, "No. Don't take care. Take risks!" In a sense it's a real risk stepping out with Jesus. It means stepping from the comfortable and familiar into a new world of faith and expectation. But actually, when you're in a crisis, the real risk is staying put and trying to sort it out yourself. Jesus, "*truly the Son of God*", is probably the safest bet you'll ever make. And when you finally take the decision to entrust yourself to him, you'll hear him say, as he did to Peter, "*Why ever did you doubt?*"

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### **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. What risk is there in "getting out of the boat"?
5. Share any ways in which you have experienced the help of Jesus in your life.
6. What new thing have you learned from this story?