



Walking or Sinking?

Sermon – Greg Holmes, 28 March 2021

Matthew 14:22-36

22 Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

25 Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.

26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

27 But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

28 “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

29 “Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

34 When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret. ³⁵ And when the men of that place recognized Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to him ³⁶ and begged him to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

THE SERMON

Introduction

It's an oldy and it really is a bit of a 'dad' joke:

Three clergy go fishing in the 'tinny' belonging to one of them.

They had not been there long when the Baptist pastor says he has run out of bait; he hops out of the boat, walks to the nearby shore and grabs more from the car.

A little later the Presbyterian pastor announces he is hungry; he hops out of the boat and grabs an ice cream for each of them from the vendor on the beach.

The Anglican minister decides this is a bit interesting and decides to try it himself; he hops out of the side of the boat and immediately SINKS.

As they help him drag himself back into the boat the Baptist minister says to the Presbyterian, 'Do you think we should tell him the sand bar is on this side of the boat?'

There are lots of beings that can walk on water - over 1,200 species have the ability to walk on water either by being ultra-light like bugs, or being fast, like the web-footed basilisk lizard.

But walking on water, in our culture, is a bit of a put down for those who think they can do anything.

(I guess that earlier this week we may all have thought it would have been a good skill to have.)

This sort of 'catch phrase' comes from one incident that happened the best part of 2000 years ago on the Sea of Galilee and it came after another remarkable and proverbial incident – feeding 5000.

It's worth noting that in Matthew, Mark and John this incident follows straight after the feeding of the 5000.

But these stories are not just here for the shock and awe value.

Matthew, the gospel writer, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, thought they were important enough to preserve for the people around him in the first century and God has thought them important enough to preserve down through the centuries to Kiama in 2021.

So there is something for us to learn here.

The Story

We heard the passage read to us and the story is very familiar.

Five thousand have been fed; the disciples go away in a boat; Jesus goes up the mountain to pray; the disciples find making headway difficult; they are struggling; Jesus goes to them; they see him walking on the water and are afraid; Jesus calms them; Peter seeks to join Jesus - tries, succeeds, then doesn't; Jesus saves him and they join the boat; Jesus calms the water and they come to shore.

Some Observations and Niggles

Read carefully – this is such a familiar story we think we know it and can miss the nuances.

First note – this is NOT the other boat story where they are all caught in a storm and Jesus is asleep and he wakes up and stills the storm with a word. That was in chapter 8. They are quite separate incidents

Also this, as with the feeding of the 5000, happened – Jesus was not merely walking on some nearby shore or sandbanks – they were well out in the middle of the lake.

First I want to pick up on just a few of the phrases in the passage as we get the flow and, I hope, the detail.

'Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat'

Note that Jesus 'forces' them to get in the boat to go. The word is that strong!

Matthew gives us no reason why; John's Gospel fills in. In John the crowd, somehow, seek to 'make Jesus king'. This is not the right time or type of kingship so Jesus avoids it. This may be why the disciples are bundled off in the boat. But this is unusual...

Matthew has made it clear that as long as the disciples had Jesus with them, everything would be all right. Climb a mountain with him, and he will give rock-solid words to build your life upon. Get in a boat with him, and he will calm the storm when the torrid waves of life's troubles threaten to drown you. When the righteous accuse you of breaking their sacred rules, he will defend you. When everyone else is puzzling over his teaching, he will explain it to you. Do what he says, and he'll treat you like family. Follow him into the desert, and you'll never go hungry. It's no wonder, then, that Jesus had to convince his disciples to get in the boat without him (Matt 14:22).

‘Up on a mountainside by himself to pray’

Jesus takes the time to pray...alone...on a mountainside. Remember it was solitude he was seeking before the 5000 gathered. The enmity of Herod, the push to make him king, the enormity of the task before him gave him plenty to pray about. Prayer was a central concern for Jesus.

How is your life going in this regard? Do we make prayer a priority?

Mark Dever asked ‘What do you do when you have a bit of spare time’ – Phone, facebook, Instagram?? – do you pray? Worth thinking about and acting on.

‘Jesus went out to them’

Jesus prays, the disciples row. The disciples are confronting a contrary wind. But note Jesus’ concern for the disciples plight...and so he seeks to be with them. And without any GPS guidance or light for that matter he unerringly finds them.

Isaiah 43:1 But now, this is what the LORD says—

- ² When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
- ³ For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

“It’s a ghost”

This is not totally unexpected; the sea to most Jews was not a comfortable place and, in the culture, was a source or place for evil, a place of confusion and, with wind, waves, spume, gathering light...this apparition engenders fear.

“Take courage, It is I, Don’t be afraid”

Recognising their anxiety, Jesus reassures them. Do they need to be afraid? – no!

Appeals ‘to not fear’ bracket ... “It is I” ... “I am” in each of the 3 accounts.

“it is I,” employing the emphatic pronoun commonly used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament where God is the speaker.

The ... deeper theological ramification, for this translates the assurance of Yahweh to the patriarchs “I am Yahweh, do not be afraid”.

This is a way of speaking that calls to mind the LORD of the Old Testament – I am who I am.

“Come”

This is Jesus’ response to Peter:

“Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water.”

The result of which is success for Peter for a while – then that sinking feeling. Then rescue... Then rebuke??? (we will come back to this) – then back to shore.

“Lord, save me!”

This is Peter’s archetypal prayer.

In fact, Peter’s desperate plea, “Lord, save me!” (v. 29) is the model prayer for all of us who face uncertain times and cry out to Jesus, knowing he’s our only hope.

*Ps 69:1–2, says **Save me, O God,***

for the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in the miry depths,

where there is no foothold.

I have come into the deep waters;

the floods engulf me.

“Truly you are the Son of God.”

This is only in Matthew. They in fact worship him – giving him his worth. Again we will come back to this.

The Players.

So lets now look at the ‘players’ in this story.

Matthew

First Matthew: He was there, he was not a seafarer, he was an accountant (tax collector). The whole thing left an indelible impression on him.

Hence as he, directed by the Holy Spirit, writes the account he calls to mind the details of the incident and includes Peter’s role in it.

And makes or rather reinforces his oft made point - “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Disciples

Let’s also look to the other disciples. A good number of them are fishermen. But they know that this is hard work and possibly dangerous. But at this stage they are not afraid, exhausted, frustrated, annoyed maybe but not scared.

Then they see something on the water! It is dawn, the light is poor, the windblown spray obscures and distorts what they see. It is a ghost they cry. Now they are scared!

It speaks and they are reassured and challenged by Jesus' words. Surely he can't be claiming to be God. John's gospel tells us they still have not worked out the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

Then Peter intervenes ...

Their final action in this story is worship. They recognise Jesus for who he is. Or at least their understanding is further developed. They growing in their discipleship – as we all must.

Peter

Remember Peter was/is a fisherman; this is his place of work but he too is struggling. Then he sees the 'ghost' who speaks reassurance. Peter takes the reassurance, pretty much, but in a way asks for more proof.

He wants to walk on the water to Jesus. He fulfils his stereotype: Brash – bold – impetuous. And he walks... And sinks. (His name does mean 'rock' – so perhaps it was to be expected!)

We go back to the start of this part of Matthew we are studying to the parable of the soils: for that brief moment Peter's faith is choked by the weeds of deep water, high waves and strong wind.

He cries out to the only one can save – after all he is the only one standing on the water.

Tainted faith... – "Why did you doubt?" says Jesus

Longman (Genesis) the opposite of faith is not doubt, but unbelief. ...The Christian will often struggle with doubt. ... The church needs to create a culture where healthy, faith-growing doubt can exist and be expressed.

...choked by the weeds.

Jesus.

And throughout all of this is Jesus - in control, strong and compassionate. The conqueror of waves, wind, water and fear.

He first removes the disciples and himself from the nationalistic fervor that the loaves and fishes creates. Then he sets himself to prayer with his Father.

Then he comes to disciples' aid, first with a word of comfort and assurance; then his identity, with a slightly veiled claim to be God.

Then further assurance. Then his encouragement of Peter to come to him. His saving of Peter from the depths - done immediately; Jesus is the one who acts to grab Peter. Then his word of mild rebuke.

Finally the water calms (as does Peter's heart rate one imagines) and they reach their destination.

But why? Is Jesus merely showing off. A word from the shore would have calmed the waves. But he decides to walk on the water to the disciples.

I think that Jesus is developing the point made by the Loaves and Fishes incident - that this is God with us.

Immanuel – is the name given for Mary's son in chapter **1v23** ***"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").***

Jesus comes to the disciples to show them that he is God and that he is 'with' them in their hardship.

The loaves and the fishes show that God (the provider of food in the desert) is with his people with compassion and provision.

This incident shows that God is with his servants (remember they are on the lake at Jesus' bidding) in, here literally, the 'storms of life'. Thus, they rightly describe Jesus as the Son of God. He, Jesus, is the Master of the wind and waves.

Conclusion

Lee Eclov: Pastor Josef Tson, a Romanian pastor and educator, suffered terribly under the Communists before the fall of the Iron Curtain. After one particular cruel bout with an interrogator he was very discouraged. Then the Lord met with him giving him a Christlike perspective. The next week the interrogation began again but everything was different. His interrogator stopped and said, "Mr. Tson, who visited you this weekend? I have in front of me a different person than the one who left here. Somebody came and changed you completely. I have to know who came and visited you."

"Jesus visited me," said Pastor Tson, "and made me ready for the battle again."

TODAY IS PALM SUNDAY

The day we traditionally think of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. But we know he is going to Jerusalem not to display his great power but to walk calmly to the Hill of the Skull to be crucified and die – FOR US MEN AND FOR OUR SALVATION.

This is God with (and for) us.

What do we learn from or about each of the Players?

Let's Concentrate on the Disciples, Peter and Jesus

Jesus

Truly he is the Son of God

The one who can multiply the loaves also treads on the water and calms the storms, things in the OT that only Yahweh, as God of the storms, can do (Ps 65:7, 89:9; 93:4; 107:29). He is Lord of the whole of creation.

Disciples

Obey, watch, trust, learn, worship.

Jesus Christ's supernatural authority over the sea and his claim, while walking upon the sea, shows and says to us that he is God's Son, "God with us" in the flesh, and he is thus worthy of our worship.

Peter

Venture to be like Jesus; look to Jesus; cry to Jesus when doubts (not to mention the water) assail.

"Why did you doubt?" — helps both Peter and the reader recognise that doubts and fears quickly disappear before a strict inquiry into their cause. Thus Peter in this little tale is both a good example and a bad example

And back to Jesus

If he could walk on water, if he could still the storm, if he must carry a cross, if he has indeed defeated death, then praise be to God! Praise be to God! Praise be to God! Truly he is the Son of God. Night and day, that's all I need to know. I must see Jesus in the darkness, in the difficulty, in the meantime.