

St Bartholomew's Burnley, Sunday 11th August 2026

11th Sunday after Pentecost

Our Gospel reading today follows on from last week: the miraculous feeding of a large crowd. The story today is a familiar one. After Jesus has spent most of the night in prayer, he comes to the disciples walking across the sea. But the wind is against them and the disciples are making no headway. Peter wants to join him on the water but begins to drown at the fierceness of the wind. Jesus saves him; they get into the boat and the wind dies down.

This episode of Peter walking on the water is only found in the Gospel of Matthew. There are quite a few episodes involving a boat in all the Gospels, including stories of Jesus calming the storm and walking on the water. But only here does one of Jesus' followers do the same thing or at least attempt the same thing.

Yet it's a typical picture of Peter. He's impulsive, he speaks before he thinks, he's full of enthusiasm, sometimes rather rash and hasty. He has a tendency to overestimate his abilities. Here we see both his courage and his doubts, his hastiness and his regrets. His keenness to join Jesus on the water almost causes him to drown. He's a typically impulsive personality, and we see that same characteristic in him through all the Gospels. It's a remarkable personality for the leader of the early church — and who ended his life as a martyr!

But what is the significance of Jesus walking on the water? It's of course physically impossible in a literal sense and certainly defies the 'laws' of nature. But that's not what this story is about. Jesus is not showing off his power, though he does have an extraordinary relationship with the sea where he's at home in it, where it never threatens him. But in the Old Testament the waters are a symbol of chaos, the chaos which out of which creation was born. God is the one who has control of this cosmic disorder; indeed in the Book of Job God is said to walk on the waters. This is a way of saying that God is above the chaos and can control it. God is not overwhelmed by it. And it's the same ability that Jesus has here, the same divine capacity to walk across the waters of chaos unharmed, and to rescue and uphold those who are in danger from it.

Chaos and disorder are things we all experience in our lives from time to time. It can happen in our homes or in our work: when something happens that throws a spanner in the works and throws everything into disarray. We can feel like Peter sometimes - as if we're drowning in it. And it's also true of the world we live in: places of war and violence and unsafety where people feel overwhelmed by what is happening around them.

Matthew tells this story as a kind of parable for the church, for the people of God. It functions at one level as a dose of reality. Because believing in God doesn't always protect us from difficult things happening, from periods of struggle in our lives. Storms will come, the winds will rise, we will find it heavy going at times — as if we're making all the effort but moving nowhere; as if we're overwhelmed and the waves are going over our heads.

It's caused sometimes by our own actions, but more often it's not our fault. We're often not to blame for whatever is going on around us, whatever we're finding difficult. Sometimes you hear a certain type of Christian say that, if you have enough faith, bad things won't happen to you. That's a very cruel message to give people. It blames them for tragedies that occur, when loved ones die, when people lose their jobs, when the violence of the world comes close. It blames them for not having strong enough faith. Trials and difficulties are part and parcel of our life, and our lack of faith isn't to blame.

But, more importantly, Matthew tells this story in order to show the presence of the Saviour walking across the waters in every situation we find ourselves — the Saviour who holds out his hands to us, the Saviour who comes when the rough wind is howling, until the sea becomes calm and the boat reaches land. Christ our Saviour is there for us, not overwhelmed or overcome by the chaos or the waves or the winds, but calm and in control and ready to save us if we call out to him. And that is our prayer today, for ourselves, our families and friends, our parish, our church, our world: the words of Peter drowning on the waters: 'Lord, save!'

In our Old Testament reading we find Elijah thoroughly discouraged, overwhelmed by the events that have taken place. He's discouraged by the hostility of the king and queen, Ahab and Jezebel; he's discouraged by the number of Israelites who have gone over to the worship of idols and have neglected the God of Israel. And so we find him hiding in a cave, to protect himself and nurse his wounds.

Yet God comes to Elijah to hold out a hand of rescue, of salvation. Elijah is a fiery character and perhaps for that reason God comes to him in a way that Elijah might not expect or even particularly like. Not in the drama of the fire, not in the earthquake, not in the storm but rather in 'a voice of thin silence'. God comes in the mystery of silence to calm and reassure him.

God can and will save us but not always in the way we expect. Sometimes it's in a dramatic way, as in our Gospel reading with Jesus striding over the waves, but at other times it's simply in silence and stillness. And that calls for insight on our part. We need to make sure that we discern more and more the presence of the Saviour in our lives, even in unexpected ways and places and people. God will save us. Chaos, struggle, and difficulty will not have the last word. The presence of God overcomes all obstacles and leads us to calm seas and eventually to land.

There's one form of meditation that we can do at nights, at the end of the day which is called the Examen. In it we recall all the events of our day, beginning from when we woke up, and we asked, Where was God in my day? And we look to discern the signs of God's presence: in a kind word spoken to us, in a sudden lifting of the heart, in the achievement of a task we've been putting off. These are all signs of God's presence. And sometimes God is there simply in moments of silence. Paul reminds us that this is not difficult to discern as God isn't far away, but close to us always, as close as our own breathing.

That's the message we are to receive today and it's also the message we're called to proclaim to others. We're to bring the knowledge of God's salvation through our words and deeds: in acts of kindness and love, in support of those who are struggling and overwhelmed, in encouragement of those who are downcast. We can be God to other people, as they can be God to us. And, as Paul reminds us: the feet of those who bring good news, whether in word or deed, are indeed beautiful.

Mthr Dorothy