

Sunday Sermon - 09.08.20

Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon at St Paul's

I'm going to do something a bit odd and ask you to forget about Jesus for a moment or two. I know, "another one of Fr. Steve's crackpot ideas", but run with me on this one, because I want to suggest that the Gospel reading we have just heard has very little to do with Jesus at all. So let's forget about him for the moment. It's really a story about a group of men in a boat.

It starts off well enough.

The lake is a freshwater one, about 21km long by about 13 km wide. The men, experienced fishermen who would have known how to handle themselves on this lake, had set out in fair weather. However, the weather on this lake is notoriously temperamental and before long they are facing huge waves lashing the boat while a raging headwind hinders progress. It is dark too by this time. Battered and beaten they are somewhat stranded in the middle of the lake, suspended between two shores. There is safety on both shores but they are unable to reach either, Chaos reigns and the boat offers little protection from the waves that crash against them. Even with their years of experience, they must have felt that this might be it.

For the disciples there is no easy or safe space. When we are faced with immense difficulties, we often cling onto the only things we feel we can be sure of for stability. In this case, however, there is no stability. The boat cannot really help them, but it's all they have got.

Most pictures of this event don't really give a sense of the difficulties that the fishermen were in. The sea is often pictures as being relatively placid. I even, on my internet searching, found a dreadful film in which the boat is sitting on a body of water that was even more relaxed than a millpond. But the picture Matthew paints is one in which absolutely the last thing you would do, if you wanted to survive, would be to climb out of the boat.

Jesus arrives on the scene. He's not too worried about the chaos all around him, instead choosing to have a stroll across the sea rather than the dry land because, to him, it's all the same thing. The storm cannot overcome him any more than the sunshine can. But, as I said, this story is not really about what Jesus can or cannot do.

Jesus approaches and the disciples, whether through fear or simply through the clarity that comes when you have water sprayed continually in your face, mistake the presence of Christ for something fantastical and intangible. They reason that it can't possibly be a person out on the water so it must be a ghost of some form or other. Whether Peter was calling the figure's bluff or not is open to debate, the key thing is that, when challenged to, Peter steps out of the boat. Rather than cling to the supposed security of the boat, he steps out into the waves and the chaos.

Is he brave? Is he foolhardy? Or is he simply being obedient? Jesus commands, Peter responds. His obedience becomes an act of discipleship. By focussing on Jesus, Peter is able to resemble him: he is able to do the same thing Christ is doing. But, when he lets his gaze wander, when he begins to doubt in the face of the tempest around him, he starts to go under. This is the moment that Peter cries out in faith and, is supported and helped by Jesus.

Peter didn't need to get out of the boat, after all, that's where, at the end of the story, he ended up! He could have chosen not to confront the waves directly. However, had he done so he would have disobeyed Jesus. Remember, Jesus said, "Come". In the Greek it's an emphatic, imperative, ἔλθέ, not a wishy-washy "If you want to, you can walk out here to me"; it's a direct command. In addition, had he refused to encounter the waves he would never have found the strength that Jesus can offer to overcome his weakness.

So, apart from being a character study of someone who, shortly after this incident makes the response "You are the Christ" to the question "Who do people say I am?", what relevance does this have for us today?

You've heard me say in the past that the church itself is often likened to a boat. Even the name of the central part, the nave, comes from the same world that we get navy from. The church is often likened to a boat, navigating its way through waters that are sometimes calm, often stormy – and indeed, often in periods of darkness. When we see a divided world, and a society that has largely turned away from organised religion and regards people in dog collars as "nutters" at best, it can often seem as if the church is fighting a storm.

Because we are currently in a boat, a boat called the church. And the honest truth is that we don't know where we are going. We can yearn for the safety of the secure shores of the past, when attendance at Sunday School numbered about a hundred, and the church was full. Or, alternatively, we may look toward the security of shores not yet reached, even though we don't know what they will be like but that we are certain must be better than they are now.

The main thing is that this gospel story shows us that the church is not something we should cling on to – we are not to remain inside but are to venture out. Yes, it's our home base from which we go and to which we return frequently, but we are called to encounter the living Christ in the midst of the chaos of ordinary life. Jesus commanded us to leave the relative security of the church to take his message to them. To cling to the inside of the church, never spreading the message, is to effectively destroy the church.

No. We make the same response Peter did, starting off in obedience but, as we lean on Christ, being filled with faith and trust. Because, with faith and trust, the storm can't really threaten us, since Christ is Lord over it.