

**Sermon preached at St Johns Harpenden on 10 August 2014 (Trinity 8) by  
Canon Nicholas Anderson (Vicar).**

**When Jesus walked on the surface of the lake**

**Matthew 14 v13-21**

Some modern scholars<sup>1</sup> inform us that this beautiful Gospel passage is a misplaced resurrection story. It is worth reading this story alongside John 21 where another group of distraught disciples were on an unsuccessful fishing trip as they struggled to come to terms with Jesus' passion and death. In Matthew's story the storm could just as easily represent an internal state of mind, the disciples feel overwhelmed by the evil of Jesus' suffering and death. We know from our personal experience how dislocating the death of someone close to us really is. We go through the motions of daily living but we feel utterly empty and bereft. This is how the events of Jesus passion and death affected the disciples. And then the Lord comes through the storm, greets them, 'It is I' and eventually steps into the boat, whereupon the disciples kneel down and worship him, saying 'Truly you are the Son of God'; actions and responses that we properly associate with Jesus' resurrection appearances; actions and responses we associate with the life of the pilgrim Church.

Now it has become fashionable to mock Peter and to deride his supposed lack of faith, and his bluster, with the result that we miss the truth that lay at the heart of this incident. Remember, his proper name was 'Simon' and that it was Jesus who gave him the name 'Peter' 'Rock'. Jesus saw in this man something we may be in danger of losing sight of: that he was a man of faith. The picture of Peter is meant to encourage us in our own faith journey.

First, note the unusual request: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water". He addresses Jesus as all serious seekers or believers do in Matthew's Gospel, "Lord", and he predicates his request on the truth of Jesus' presence. Peter is not asking for supernatural powers, rather it is a recognition that his extraordinary request has no validity apart from the command of Jesus, and what he commands, he

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<sup>1</sup> This is the view of the Prof Maurice Casey who taught NT studies at Nottingham University, Dr Wilfred Harrington who teaches in Ireland and the US, Prof Dan Harrington and Prof John P Meier, both US scholars. I pre-resurrection Jesus could not walk on water. There is a rich biblical background to the story, e.g., Ps 107:23-32, Ps 69:2; Ps 144:7.

makes possible. The commands of Jesus, taken seriously, create miracles; they open an incredible reservoir of divine resources.

The second thing to note is that when the command is spoken, Peter gets out of the boat and begins to walk towards Jesus. In Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's glorious classic, "The Cost of Discipleship", he has this to say:

"Peter had to leave the boat and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith...The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if people imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves..."<sup>2</sup>

Bonhoeffer goes on to draw the theological paradox that emerges from this scene: only the one who believes is obedient, and only the one who is obedient believes. Had Peter remained in the boat and not taken the first step, his faith would have been worthless. If Peter had remained in the boat we would never have heard of him. Now Pastor Bonhoeffer was to draw on this experience in his own life. When war was declared in 1939 he was in New York, but swiftly returned to Germany. He would have known that that action would lead to his own death. Faith without obedience is worthless. Our experiences may not be as dramatic, but all believes must go through this.

The third and final thing to note is that when Peter walks he becomes frightened by the wind, begins to sink, cries out to Jesus, and is rescued. This familiar sequence of actions needs to be understood in the light of the obedient act of faith that put Peter on the water in the first place. This is not a story of doubt, this is a story of Peter, the faithful follower who becomes overwhelmed by the circumstances surrounding him, who begins to lose his nerve when he discovers the odds are stacked against him, but who from Jesus finds a steadying, delivering hand.

So my friends, in this story Peter becomes a mirror for us, we can see our own faith responses reflected in him and we can take heart. We too can find courage from his daring response to Jesus' command and from Jesus' gracious move to secure his faltering faith. Again our experiences can help us. Sometimes we feel utterly

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<sup>2</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship* NY: Macmillan & Co, 1960, pp 53-60

overwhelmed by the circumstances of our lives, our faith seems broken, and the darkness seems oppressive and deadly. And as the Lord extended his hand to Peter so he does for us. Jesus is not a ghost from the past but Son of God of the here and now of our lives; the Lord who sends faithful disciples to us, people who offer a caring hand, who walk beside us when our faith falters, who bring us his peace. From this little story Matthew reveals for us the power of faith which flows from the saving presence of the Lord.