

Jesus walks on water and calls Peter

Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison for the webcast service for the parish of St Peter's and All Saints', Nottingham, on 9th August 2020 (Trinity 9)

As we continue to move through August and the long Trinity season, we remain in something of a state of transition in our parish. We've now had three Sunday services at All Saints, which have in fact been attended by people from both our churches, and we're settling into something of a pattern which takes account of social distancing and everything else we need to be aware of at this time. We are also making plans to resume the 8.15 and 10.45 services at St Peter's when the progress on the roof makes this possible; the starting date for these is expected to be Sunday 13th September. We also hope to open the Coffee Room the following week. We will of course confirm all this nearer the time.

But let's turn to today's Gospel reading. Jesus went up a mountain to pray, while the disciples go out on Lake Galilee in a boat, heading for the other side of the lake. Lake Galilee is quite large, and certainly big enough for winds to make the waters quite choppy and indeed dangerous. On this occasion the disciples were in fact struggling with a headwind when they were astonished to see Jesus coming towards them across the waters. Peter doesn't believe it's actually Jesus, and so he calls out saying, 'If it is you, Lord, call me to come to you on the water'. Quite understandably, however, he begins to sink; he calls out again to Jesus, who saves him. When they are all safe in the boat, it's rather striking to see that Jesus doesn't have any sympathy for their fear but rebukes them for not having enough faith.

I imagine that most if not all of us would feel that Peter has had a rather rough deal. It was maybe rather rash of him to encourage Jesus to call him to walk out onto the water; he could well have drowned and certainly had a very chastening experience. Surely it was also quite a dangerous way for Peter and the other disciples to learn about the need to be strong in faith. And it's quite understandable that they were pretty frightened to see their Lord walking on water, exhibiting even greater supernatural powers than he'd demonstrated hitherto. This episode, then, is an important new stage in the way in which St Matthew paints a picture of a Messiah who is clearly divine as well as human.

But let's return to the message and the meaning of the miracle, set out so dramatically in the gospel reading: which is Jesus' insistence that faith is so important; and of course, not just any faith, but faith in God. The theme of faith runs like a thread through the gospels and the epistles. Remember how in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells the people not to be anxious,

but to trust that God will care for them and provide for their wellbeing. We think also of the rich man who accumulated large stocks of grain in barns but then died before he could enjoy the fruits of his labours; through this story also Jesus tells the people not to put their faith in material things but in God. He commends the faith of people who come to him for healing; he says that through faith in God we can do anything, even - metaphorically speaking - move mountains. St Paul's writings follow on from this by emphasising that our faith in the crucified and risen Christ should lie at the heart of our walk with God, and that all else will flow from this, including good works and all the love and compassion which we are called to show to those around us.

Living by faith does not mean sitting back and expecting God to do everything for us, however. It's quite telling that Jesus told Peter, that night on Lake Galilee, to step out of the boat; Peter did so, and however faltering his steps, they were steps into the unknown, well beyond his comfort zone. He ventured out onto the water because he believed in Christ and was obedient to him; and it was no doubt through experiences such as this, which strengthened and deepened his faith, that he eventually became the person whom Jesus called the rock, upon whom the Church was to be built. And when he started to sink beneath the waves, he came to know for himself, in a way which he would never forget, the meaning of these words of psalm 69: 'Save me, O God, for the waters have closed in on my very being ... I have stepped into deep water and the waves are washing over me ...' These are words of one who turns to God for help at a time of extreme threat and danger, in the faith that God will not be aloof or uncaring but will bring strength and safety.

The miracle of Jesus walking on the water, and saving Peter from drowning, has a happy ending. But what about the experiences we have, or the events which we see all too often around us, which do not end so happily? The reality is that suffering and sadness are, sadly, part and parcel of life, if only in that illnesses are bound to come and go, accidents happen, we age, and sometimes the acts of inhumanity which people inflict upon one another can be truly barbaric. There are times when we do feel protected by God, no doubt, and for this we should always give thanks. But when the path of life is unavoidably hard, it is all the more important for us to remain strong in faith and to turn afresh to God for strength, guidance and consolation. It is remarkable how God can and does bring blessing and hope at moments of the most acute need, sometimes through words of comfort given directly to us, and sometimes through the love and care of those around us.

I want to conclude by reflecting briefly on a sombre event which the world marked last Thursday. This was the 75th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. You

may have seen in the news last week the video of the explosion in Beirut which killed almost 150 people. The mushroom cloud which was seen there reminds us of Hiroshima, but the Hiroshima explosion was on a much more massive scale, killing upwards of 70,000 people and injuring a similar number. Let us remember in our prayers today all those who suffered and died in that bombing, and that of Nagasaki a few days later, as well as the casualties of the explosion in Beirut. Where is God in all this? God is telling us, as he has told countless generations before us, not to put our faith in false gods, whether these be the excessive accumulation of money and possessions, weapons whose destructive capacity far outweighs what is necessary for national self-defence; and even, as in Beirut, industrial products which may seem harmless but can, on occasion, bring devastation and death. God regularly told the people of Old Testament times not to worship false Gods but to put their faith in the one true God. Jesus' message is similar; and our faith in him on a personal level needs to flow forth into a faith that a better world is not just desirable, but is actually possible if enough people live by his teachings of love and mercy, peace and reconciliation, and the knowledge that every human life is of infinite value in the eyes of God. Amen.