

WALKING ON WATER - REALLY?

Preached at All Saints Church Rothbury on 10th August 2008

Our gospel is one which often gives Christians great difficulty. The idea of Jesus walking on water simply to get across a lake, when he had used the boat only yesterday before the loaves and fishes, seems not to fit in with how Jesus operated. He didn't avoid trudging all the way across Samaria, getting so tired that he had to sit down at the well. He walked to Bethany when he went to see the tomb of Lazarus - and then calling him forth.

Now, I am not saying that Jesus did not have the power, as the Living Word, present at the creation - through whom all things were made. But he deliberately chose not to. In the week it was the feast of the Transfiguration and the Greek text indicates that the glory somehow burst out - as if the human flesh could no longer contain it.

Some commentators say that this is much more like a post-resurrection appearance, when Jesus' way of working was much more like that. And maybe the gospel writers did get the chronology wrong. After all the nearest book to the events was about 30 years later.

In today's account, Jesus not recognized at first, and when the disciples know who he is, Peter gets out of the boat and comes rushing to Jesus. Remember the post resurrection fishing story, with Jesus on the shore cooking breakfast. Again they don't know who he is until they get a bit nearer. Peter rushes ahead of them to get to the Lord,

When the disciples are on the shore, Jesus takes bread and fish and gives it to them. What a close parallel to the feeding of the 5,000 we have just had, when the Lord gives out bread and fish.

You can see the connections. The other thing which might indicate that the events have got themselves out of order a bit is where the gospel writer records that the disciples worshipped Jesus. The only other occurrence of the disciples' worshipping Jesus is on the mountain after the resurrection.

But for the rest of this sermon I won't worry about quite when it happened. I am not even going to address **IF** it happened. I am going to take it for granted that it **DID** happen. What I want to do for a few moments is to see what the story might mean to us today.

First - Jesus orders the disciples to cross without him. He needed to go off and spend time alone. He was tired after spending time with a large crowd - bigger than the whole population of the Valley, all of whom wanted a piece of him, as it were. And he needed to pray.

If Jesus needed to pray - and spend some time at it, I am sure that WE too need to pray all the more so. I only manage about a half hour a day, if that - which I know is not enough, and I would be better, feel better, and work better if I spent longer with the lord.

Perhaps when Jesus actually told them to go, it was a small test of obedience. Perhaps it was also to show them that if they get into dire circumstance when doing what he had told them, he would be there to help.

The sea itself in biblical thought stands for chaos - the spirit moved over the waters which were without form or void. People were afraid of the sea in Jesus' day. Being on the sea is itself a threat, representing all the anxieties and dark powers that threaten the goodness of the created order. To be at sea evokes images of death, the active power that threatens the goodness of life.

The sea is here a barrier that separates the disciples from Jesus, who represents the presence of God. In the midst of the chaos of the world, they are left alone in the boat/church, with only their fragile craft preserving them from its threat, buffeted by the stormy winds of conflict and persecution, mentioned three times.

The other thing to note is that they were heading towards the Gentile territory. That is scary too - no wonder Jesus had to tell them sternly to get into the boat.

I think that our struggles to reach people on the "other side", people who

appear to have no faith in God, are signs of our little faith. When disciples first cross the lake through a storm and Jesus was asleep and had to be woken to calm the storm, what was the outcome? They landed safely on the Gentile shore.

With **this** boat trip, Jesus had sent them again to "the other side". He comes to them at about 3 am in the morning - in the middle of the night when doubts are fiercest.

In the account in Matthew, Jesus points out to the disciples how small their faith is. He doesn't say they have none - just not very much. Nor does he provide them an instant answer for getting a firmer, stronger faith. Jesus doesn't offer to increase their faith, nor does he give them any guidance as to what they might do to increase it themselves.

One would think that if "little faith" is what's holding these disciples back, then Jesus would tell them what to do about this problem. But he doesn't. He points out their little faith as an explanation for why they are not making progress as quickly as they would like, but he never tells them how they can get more faith to remedy that situation. That had to come with experience, with learning to trust. And I think that is really what is at the heart of this acted out parable. It is a learning story.

We can see that Jesus' presence did not bring an instant miracle - the stilling of the storm; Instead they have his assuring word: "Be courageous. I am he. Do not be afraid." This is a message that he often gives. 'Do not be afraid. It is me!' He gives it today.

If we take the boat to symbolize the church (as it often does in early Christian writing, then the sea, as it often does, can symbolize chaos. This can be something that occasionally creeps into congregations <g>. Eugene Boring (in The New Interpreters' Bible) writes:

I wonder how many of our congregational struggles are the result of struggling in the boat without Jesus (or without his word)? How many people or congregations would be "terrified" at Jesus' desire to (miraculously) come to

them, because they have become comfortable living without Jesus' in their midst? Thinking and hoping and praying for some way that they - by themselves - can calm the stormy waters? Can storms at sea (and "little faith") keep disciples, and keep us, from reaching the destinations where Jesus has sent them? Is that also true for storms in congregations?

Peter leapt out of the boat and his courage and his faith failed. Jesus grabbed him and helped him back into the boat.

But to interpret this story to mean that "if we **really** had enough faith we should be able to do the miraculous", and then to be downcast because, let's be frank, we just don't cut the mustard. Our faith is probably as small as a mustard seed. But Jesus encourages us in this lived out parable like this:

I will sometimes send you out in scary and difficult circumstances. It will often seem that I am not there. But do not be afraid. Hang on to that little bit of faith that you do have. And sure enough, you will find that I am with you, and I will help you, and give you the confidence you need.

I am with you till the very end of time - these are Jesus' last words in Matthew's gospel. You can see the point he is trying to get across in the way he recounts this story. Don't be afraid, the Lord is with you. Hang on to your faith and you will be safe.