

August 9th 2020 for 9th Sunday after Trinity –

Rev Tony Rindl, Vicar of St Mary's Church Watford

Bible Reading Romans 10:5-15

Gospel Reading Matthew 14:22-33

May the words that I speak be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living word, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

I think it is worth us reflecting on the location for our epic story of Jesus, and even Peter, walking on water during a violent storm. The Sea of Galilee is an absolute must for anyone visiting the Holy Land. It is a place of beauty, a lovely lake, surrounded by hills. Not only do many the events recorded in the four Gospels happen around the Galilee region but the landscape hasn't really changed since the time of Jesus. If you take away tourism, then the way of life in that region, hasn't changed very much either. Lots of agriculture in the surrounding hills. And people today still fish on the lake. It is quite a big lake about 13 miles long and 8 miles wide. And the lake is fed by the River Jordan. The source of the River is in the foothills of Mount Hermon on the Lebanon border to the north. The River Jordan enters the lake by its northern shore and leaves by the southern shore where it forms the Jordan valley and then eventually flows into the Dead Sea. What is remarkable about the Sea Galilee is that it is some 200 metres or 700 feet below sea level. The lake itself is some 40 metres deep in the middle. And at this time of year the temperature would be somewhere in the region of 33-37 degrees Celsius, so nice and warm. And because it's a hot climate and there is this volume of water the region is prone to frequent thunderstorms. And that is an important fact when it comes to understanding our Gospel reading.

In our reading only Peter is mentioned by name. But he, along with his fellow disciples, his brother Andrew, and James and John were all fishermen. They were used to boats and in fact they were used to being in boats at night time, often the best time for fishing. And they were also used to storms. In fact in the time of Jesus beacons would be lit on the surrounding hillsides not only acting as a navigation aid in the night time, but also acting as an early warning system when storms were imminent.

Our reading today isn't the only time storms are mentioned. And in an early chapter in Matthew's Gospel the disciples are out on the lake when a violent storm suddenly comes up on the lake. The disciples were afraid but Jesus that time was asleep on the boat, and they woke him up because they feared that they were all going to drown.

Now I've done a bit of sailing in my time albeit a little later on in life. Now some of my fellow crew members were much more experienced than me, and I noticed that when the sea got choppy and the waves were quite large and it was a bit daunting, that these guy would constantly continue to walk around the yacht, and quite easily, because they were used to those kind of conditions.

So it must have been one mighty storm for the disciples who were experienced fishermen and therefore experienced sailors, it must have been quite some storm for them to be frightened.

But this fits with what we know of the geography of the region. As I said before the River Jordan flows out of the lake and forms the Jordan Valley. And the Jordan Valley is part of the Great African Rift, which runs from the Baqqua Valley in Lebanon in the North, right down to Mozambique in South East Africa. And when the wind blows up the Rift Valley from the south, the valley forms a giant wind tunnel. And in actual fact such a storm happened when I was staying in Tiberius once. Fortunately I was not on a boat in the night! I was safely tucked up in my hotel bedroom. But the next day everywhere, and I mean everywhere, was covered in this layer of sand.

Now we don't know for certain how severe the storm was in our Gospel reading. Unlike the earlier storm mentioned in chapter 8, there is no mention of the disciples being afraid of the storm per se. But what we do know, is that they were sailing from Tabgha which is believed to be the site of the feeding of the 5,000 which happened just before today's reading, a place near Capernaum the fishing village where Peter is from. Now Tabgha and Capernaum are on the north shore of the lake. And Jesus tells them to sail to the other side which presumably meant that they were to sail in a southerly direction and if the wind was against them, as we are told, then I would imagine that the wind has come up the African Rift Valley, the Jordan Valley, and you can imagine that the storm was a bad one. The boat being buffeted by the waves as the Gospel writer describes the situation.

So let us be clear that when we talk about Jesus walking on the water, we are not talking about the water being flat which would have been astonishing in itself. What we are talking about are big waves and a big storm. The other thing about the setting for our reading, is the disciples had set sail presumably in the evening and had been in the boat all night, as it was shortly before dawn in the half light that the disciples see Jesus walking on the water.

That's the background. The disciples had set sail having witnessed the miracle of multiplication, the feeding of the 5,000. When they had been active in the distribution of the food, the loaves and the fishes. So they had already had this busy day and now they had been up all night battling against the storm. So they must have been exhausted. In the early half light just before the dawn somewhere in the middle of the lake still some considerable distance from the shore they see Jesus. It is not the storm that makes the disciples fearful, but this apparition, this figure on the water. The last thing that they would have expected would have been to see Jesus walking on the water.

Yes, his teaching was inspirational. Yes, they would have been amazed by what they had seen and heard. That latest miracle, the feeding of the large crowd, must have still been fresh in their minds. Indeed they would probably have been grateful for the left-over food on their journey across a lake. Many times Jesus will have surprised the disciples. But to walk on water? That is impossible. Furthermore it is not a flat calm lake, as I already said, it is in the middle of a storm. There are waves

buffeting the boat so what the disciples witnessed was utterly astonishing. No wonder they thought it was a ghost! But they hear Jesus say "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." And then when Peter says "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water." And Jesus replies "come".

Peter and the other disciples are left in no doubt it is Jesus. Not for the first time the disciples are in the middle of a storm and they are with Jesus. But not merely in the boat with them but walking all over the storm, being on top of it, being master of it.

We are going to pause for a moment and have another song but when we come back we are going to look in more detail at what this passage has to say to us about meeting Jesus in the storms of life. Not merely being with us in the boat. Not merely keeping us safe or even calming the storm, but mastering it, overcoming it.

Let me tell you a joke. There was a vicar, and a Catholic priest and a Methodist minister and they were on their fishing trip together. They were in a boat in the middle of a lake. And it got to around 11 o'clock and the Catholic priest announces to his friends it is time for elevenses. And so he gets out of the boat and he walks across the lake and he comes back with piping hot coffee and some biscuits. Some time later the vicar announces that it is time for lunch. And he too gets out of the boat and walks across the water and he comes back with a tray full of sandwiches. Well it's now mid afternoon and the Methodist minister says "well it must be time now for afternoon tea. I guess it is my turn to get the refreshments." So he too gets out of the boat but he begins to sink. And as the vicar and the catholic priest haul him back onto the boat, the vicar says to the catholic priest "we should have told him about the stepping stones!" And the catholic priest says "what stepping stones?"

My friends let me make it quite clear that in our Gospel reading there are no stepping stones. There is no trickery of light, or some optical illusion. Jesus walks on the water and it's stormy, there are fierce waves everywhere. The water is not flat and they are in the middle of the lake where the water is probably at a depth of some 40 odd metres.

We sometimes talk about a perfect storm. And this episode seems to have all the ingredients. The previous day the disciples had been exceptionally busy, and now they have battled all night with this storm. They are tired. The wind is against them and they will have been cold, wet, exhausted and with no knowledge of when the storm will end. Or indeed when they will arrive safely at their destination.

How true it is that it is when we are most tired and most exhausted that we encounter the fiercest storms of life, where it is not only the wind that seems to be against us. I suppose like the storms on the sea of Galilee things just build up, until they become too much and everything seems to be against us. But this passage is not merely about some survival guide telling us to batten down the hatches, hold on tight and hope for the best. This is about getting out of the boat and walking all over the problem. Or I think more accurately trampling all over the stormy waters of life.

It is about overcoming the storm and reaching new heights even doing what might seem impossible.

As the disciples battle the storm in the half light, it is not surprising that they don't instantly recognise Jesus. As I said they would not have been expecting to see Jesus to be walking on water towards them. But nevertheless they have seen something in the middle of the storm. Something has grabbed their attention. And in all the chaos of the storm, they hear Jesus speak to them. "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

I don't know about you, but there are times when I can feel completely overwhelmed and metaphorically I just about cling to the side of the boat, and hope for the best. Often or not it is when I'm really tired and exhausted. It is precisely at such moments as that I need to hear Jesus' commanding voice "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." But how do we hear that voice? I think we have to stop, and take five. We have to remember the earlier storms we have been through, and to remember how Jesus has helped us in the past. We have to believe that Jesus is with us. We have to believe his eternal promise that he will never leave us or forsake us no matter how difficult and painful the situation is. We have to listen to what Jesus is telling us to do. And that might mean taking courage and being attentive.

Now we don't know actually how far away Jesus was. Far enough that when Peter got out of the boat and started walking towards Jesus, he was then far enough away, that when he started to sink, he was far enough away that he unable to grab the boat. Now we are talking about an experienced fisherman who would have been in many storms over the years and I would imagine in that time, would have fallen off the boat in all those storms. And no doubt he was also a strong swimmer, but even so he panics and cries out for help.

Perhaps that might be just my take on the situation, but we know that this event happens in the middle of a storm when the wind is against you and the rain lashes down and it is so hard to hear what anybody is saying in such conditions. Even when they are shouting directly towards you. When we are in the middle of the storms of life, how hard it is for us to hear God's voice. And yet we have a lot of things going for us. We have our family and our friends. We have our faith. We have past experiences of God helping us. We have our hope. We have our instruction manual, the Bible. We have the testimony of others who have gone through similar experiences and survived. The point is that we are never alone, even if it feels like we are. And so we take five. We read our Bible. We read passages like the one we've got today. We might ask a friend to pray with us. We might take five and be still, and know that God is with us.

There are countless times in the Bible where God's people do precisely that; be still and know that God is with them. The writer of the Psalms knew that. In Psalm 46 we read that 'God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.' What a wonderful and bold statement that is. Do we have faith to believe that? The psalm goes on to talk about battles raging, nations in uproar, and yet in the middle of all that the psalmist hears God say, 'be still and know that I am God.'

Again, we read in Exodus of the Israelites escaping from Egypt and being pursued by a fierce Egyptian army. And yet Moses says to the Israelites, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."

There is something else in our Gospel reading that we have yet to unpack, one glaring omission on my part until now, and that is, it is Jesus who made the disciples get into the boat in the first place. And it is Jesus who tells Peter to get out of the boat and come to him walking on the stormy water. Friends, following Jesus is not an easy option. It is no guarantee of an easy life, quite the opposite in many ways. But Jesus will take you to places you never thought possible and do things you never imagined you could do. It only took one word from Jesus for Peter to get out of the boat and walk on water.

It is an interesting scenario. It is Jesus who made them get into the boat. The disciples who have no control over the ensuing storm. Yet it is Peter who says to Jesus. "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." And Jesus replies "Come". It is an odd exchange, but maybe this is Peter's prayer. A prayer that goes something like this, 'I am in the middle of a fierce storm, and yet I see you there walking on the water. Walking on top of this storm. Help me to also overcome this storm.' And Peter hears Jesus' reply to his request. If it really is Jesus then anything is possible. And so he puts his faith and trust in the Lord. And as long as he keeps focussed on Jesus he is able to do the impossible, and walk on water. But as soon as he takes his eye off Jesus, and remembers where he is and sees the stormy water all around him, then the faith and the trust evaporate, and he begins to sink. And in fear of drowning he cries out to the Lord. Jesus reaches out his hand and caught him. Presumably Jesus is still walking on the water. And so Peter must have again, walked on the water to get back into the boat. In other words, he completed the task. He has done the impossible. He may have faltered but Jesus is at hand to help.

Jesus calls us to follow him. Jesus calls us to be more like him. He calls us to reach our full human potential. And it is often in the most challenging times that we learn, and we grow, and it is not easy, but with Jesus everything is possible.

Be still and know that he is God. Amen.