

Deeper into Discipleship
Kings 19:19-21, Matthew 14: 22-33
13th August 2023
by Erna Stevenson

A couple of weeks ago at Lunchbreak we listened to a little concert given by a Community Choir. It was a group of mixed ability people challenged by multiple needs, who made a 'joyful noise to the Lord' as the Psalmist says. They were really joyful, there was no mistaking their enthusiasm. They performed some popular songs accompanied by a professionally recorded version of those songs. Their conductor did a marvellous job of keeping them together and on track, which was no mean feat, for in their enthusiasm sometimes they were pulling this way or that. Watching her you could detect two little movements which helped her. A step to one side took her closer to the source of the true sound to keep herself in tune; Then another step nearer to the singers to bring them back to the right note with her (now) confident singing.

For me this was a lovely illustration of what Jesus is doing at the beginning of our Gospel reading for today. He is surrounded by mixed ability people with multiple and differing needs, who all look to him for leadership and guidance and pressing on him with various expectations. How does he cope with it all? Well, on the one hand he regularly goes off to pray, to get nearer to the source of his true vocation, to realign himself with God, who had called him. And on the other, he goes right back to the people to strengthen them and encourage them and take them with him on the journey of faith.

In Matthew's account the 'miracle' of Jesus walking on the water follows on after another 'miracle', the Feeding of the five thousand+ people, which we heard about last Sunday. We all relate to 'miracles' in different ways. There are those who take them at their literal meaning and insist on it being a condition of true Christian faith. At the other end there are those who dismiss them altogether as expressions of a pre-scientific age, which have no place in our highly developed technological societies. Both of these approaches dwell on the physical aspects of these stories trying to answer the question: did it really happen like this? This would be a legitimate question, if the Bible were a scientific document or if its authors were writing biographies or eye-witness reports. But the Bible – more than anything – is a faith document. It has been produced out of faith for believers with the purpose of strengthening their faith. Its stories have been told and retold and edited according to the needs of particular audiences.

And so it is with Jesus' miracle stories. They were told to people of a very different world view from ours and they were told well after the actual events by leaders of the early Christian communities to the members of those communities. So, as we are reading them now in the 21st century, we are increasingly aware of the importance of different questions, like who wrote a particular passage and why, when was it written and to whom was it addressed. And then to see what its implications may be for us, current day believers.

If we approach our Gospel passage this way the first thing we can establish is that it has been written after and in the light of the Resurrection, the greatest miracle of all. Once we have that picture in mind it becomes easy to discover some parts of our story echoing details of the Resurrection narrative itself. After the amazing, exhilarating 3 years with Jesus, his death on the Cross plunged the disciples in the deepest of crises. Just like in our story when after the uplifting, incredible experience of the feeding of the multitudes and other acts of power by Jesus, the disciples find themselves in the midst of a frightening, life-threatening storm. Knowing what we've just heard earlier about the significance of the unmasterable, destroying power of the sea in the Hebrew mind, the appearance of the ghostly figure on the waves may recall the first, tentative encounters of the disciples with the risen Christ.

Within this frame work telling the events of Jesus walking on the water and calming the sea is a faith confession, the Resurrection story told in another way. It tells of The Christ, who comes to his followers and to us in the depth of despair as the One, who himself has

walked through the valley of death and who is Lord even of the death-dealing sea and he says: 'Do not be afraid, I am here with you.'

Although this story also appears in Mark's Gospel, yet when Matthew takes it over from Mark, he changes it by adding the cameo role of Peter. So, when there is a change like this, we are bound to ask, why? Well, Biblical scholarship tells us that Matthew's church in Antioch in 80-s CE led a much more settled existence than that of Mark's some 20 years earlier during Nero's persecution. So, it is likely that Matthew's concern was no longer just to help his audience survive, but to teach them how to integrate their faith deeper into their more peaceful everyday life. Hence the inclusion of Peter's attempt to walk on the water/navigate its depths.

Sometimes, poor Peter gets a rough deal from the biblical interpreters and this story is no exception. He is impetuous, they say, why on earth would anybody try to get out of a boat in the middle of a raging sea? He should know that he is not up to it. His faith is not up to it. Doesn't he know that it's dangerous to look down? He should keep his eyes on Jesus. No wonder that Jesus rebukes him. Well, all this may be true, but it may not be the truth and nothing but the truth. Looking at the text more closely may reveal another way of understanding it, and it may be in our interest to do so, as I think Peter here represents all of us practising Christians, who can sometimes swim and sometimes sink on the waves of life.

So, how does the story go? All the disciples are terrified, doubting their very eyes, thinking there is a ghost approaching them. In the usual translation Peter joins them with their doubting, fearful response when he says: 'Lord, IF it is you, tell me to come to you over the waters'. So, he is already gets a black mark for not believing Jesus. But according to those who know Biblical Greek, the more accurate translation would be: 'Lord, SINCE it is you..... What a difference that little change makes! Peter does believe it is Jesus, hence his request, *let me really follow you, let me do what you are doing. With your help I can manage it.* It is a true faith declaration and Jesus doesn't disappoint Peter. He grants his request and calls to him: 'Come!'

Of course, Matthew agrees with Mark and wants to show how in Jesus the power of God, the signs of the Kingdom had arrived. But with his addition of Peter's story, he takes it further. For him it is not just about Jesus and not just about the unbelief of the disciples, as it is in Mark. According to him this is a great moment for Peter as well as for Jesus. Before he condemns Peter for his little faith and near-sinking experience, he acknowledges that, **PETER HAS ACTUALLY WALKED ON THE WATER!** Meaning that Jesus' disciples are capable of far more than even they dare believe if they keep holding unto Jesus. I will be forever grateful for those few steps of Peter on the water. For me, this is the most inspiring part of Matthew's message, and what I hope we can all take away from Peter's story.

And what of Jesus? He could've had some reasons for refusing Peter's request. He could have wanted to prevent Peter from a great blunder. He could have been concerned with his own unique reputation as a man of special powers and could have been satisfied with calming the storm and bringing peace to the terrified disciples. But Matthew's Jesus looks beyond all this. He 'walks on the water' not to seek his own glory and show up the inadequate faith of the disciples. Instead, he encourages Peter to get out of the boat and join him on the waves. We can give thanks for the safety and stability of our lives, where we can practise our faith unhindered, but God wants us to have a richer, bigger life by calling us to a deeper, more 'adventurous' faith, as someone called it. We can do it if we "put our hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water, to put our hand in the hand of the man from Galilee" quoting from a famous gospel song.

So Jesus saves Peter and, even his so-called rebuking words could be taken more like the words of a parent to their child, who had just narrowly failed an exam. Don't doubt yourself, you got it! Like that parent and in a truly prophetic manner, Jesus is getting ready to hand over his mantle to Peter, to his disciples, to you and to me. Just like Elijah does in our OT reading. Like that most revered ancient prophet, Jesus has the future in mind when he would no longer be with his disciples in bodily form but the seeds of the kingdom he had sown will have to be nurtured and grown until they grow into a large enough tree to hold all the different birds of the world. In the Hebrew Bible Elisha accepts the mantel, faithfully

serves his mentor and eventually takes his place as a worthy successor of his Master. The picture of Jesus walking on the water stands for 'weathering the storms' which even our relatively settled lives throw at us day by day. And once we have 'graduated' (to mix our metaphors) seeing to it that the 'mantel' of our faith is handed over to those who follow after us. May the Spirit of Jesus enable us to do so.