

Mariners 2022 - Step out of the boat

Date: 30 October 2022, 20th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32, 43; Matthew 14:22-33

In the opening scene of the play *The Silver Slipper* we meet its hero, brother Rodrigue, lashed to the mast of a ship sunk by pirates, drifting on this piece of wood in a raging ocean.

Brother Rodrigue says to God that he is “fastened to the cross, but the cross on which I hang is not fastened to anything else. It drifts on the sea.” Now, I confess I’ve not seen this play, I don’t really know anything about it. But in his *Introduction to Christianity*, Pope Benedict suggests that this picture describes the situation the believer finds himself in. “Only a loose plank bobbing over the void seems to hold him up, and it looks as if he must eventually sink.” The believer clings to the cross and is constantly threatened by a sea of doubt. But, Benedict suggests, the unbeliever is in fact in the same position, constantly troubled by doubts about his unbelief.

This is the paradox of God, the paradox of human life. We long for there to be more to life than simply the stuff of matter. We want love to last forever. We long for Truth to be real, and not just the will of those in power. We long for there to be goodness that can’t be undone. We long for beauty that lasts. We have an inkling that something, someone beyond us holds everything together, if only we could touch him. But we’re not sure and we’re not willing to commit until we are. The believer is assailed by doubts. The unbeliever is haunted by the possibility that God may be there. “In short,” Benedict writes, “there is no escape from the dilemma of being [human].”¹

One problem we have is that we reduce God to our comprehension, to something we can grasp, something we can control. But, this is absurd. If God exists, he can’t be put under a microscope. He’s much bigger than our field of vision. He contains all things - how could we contain him much less control him? We’re a part of his creation. He’s the one who made and upholds all things. We come to the end of ourselves long long before we come to the end of him. And yet, we’re not sure. How can we know?

The encounter the disciples had with Jesus that we read in Matthew’s Gospel well captures the human dilemma.

If you had a look at this text in the Bible you’d see that it comes immediately after Jesus miraculously feeding the 5000. It’s evening. Now he has sent the disciples across the sea of

¹ Pope Benedict, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius Press, 2004: 43-45

Galilee by boat while he himself takes some time out with God to pray. Just as an aside, that is always a good thing to do. It's often that we find God in solitude and quiet. Maybe one of the reasons we find it hard to find God is because we're never alone, and when we are we have to have the TV, the radio, or social media on. Maybe we're afraid of what we'd find if we were simply alone with God and our own thoughts.

The disciples on the boat.

The scene shifts to the disciples on the boat. They struggle against the wind and the waves through the night. To step onto a vessel and cast out to sea is to know your limitations. You can only go where the boat can go. The sea and the sky are much much bigger than you. You can only fight against the wind and waves for so long before you are overwhelmed. The mariner knows that life is fragile, precarious. No matter the freedom of the ocean, you still have to come back to shore, to place your feet on solid ground.

The maritime metaphors embedded in our language help us grasp something of the nature of life. We want life to be smooth sailing, to keep an even keel. But we can find ourselves all at sea, in the storm, decks awash, battling against the wind and waves. This is where the disciples found themselves, battling all night, tossed to and fro on the waves.

But then they saw a figure coming towards them, walking on the water. This was totally outside of their experience. This sort of thing does not happen. We know it doesn't happen. They knew it didn't happen. And here was this figure. They were terrified. They thought it was a ghost. But what does Jesus say?

Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid.

There's a little clue as to what's going on here in Jesus' words, "It is I". In Greek these are *ego eimi*, which could be translated "I am". This in fact is the name by which God calls himself in the Old Testament, the name he revealed to Moses and his ancient people the Jews. When Jesus says "I am", he's not just telling the disciples, "It's me", he is also hinting that he somehow shares in the identity and being of the God of Israel, the one true God, who made heaven and earth, the sea and everything in it. This is who Jesus claims to be, whom the New Testament records Jesus to be, whom Christians have always believed Jesus to be - God, come in the flesh, God, come as one of us. If that is true, then this is a miracle yes, extraordinary yes, but no big thing for the one who made all things. As one writer put it, "He can find a place for the sole of his foot in everything that he has made."² Jesus' words and actions reveal

² Oliver O'Donovan, *The Word in Small Boats*, Eerdmans, 2010: 133

who he is. He is totally outside the realm of our experience, and yet just what we long for. God, touching the world.

Lord, if it is you - the challenge of faith

This encounter is not yet over. Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.” You see, we may be somewhat uncomfortable at the idea of Jesus walking on water. I guess he can do that sort of thing if he is God. But we can leave that over in the “I don’t know basket”. It would be nice if it were true, but I’m not sure. Perhaps God does exist, and it would be nice for him to show up just to let us know he’s there. But in any case he probably should be busy feeding the hungry and that sort of thing. I’ll just get on with my life, thank you very much. Peter’s question though says that God cannot remain at arms length. He will transform our lives. This is the challenge of faith. It’s decidedly uncomfortable. Because it means you have to get out of the boat.

But notice that faith means trust. Lord, if it is you. We can only get out of the boat, if it is indeed Jesus. But if it is him, in all he says he is and what he has done, then, anything is possible. Not only can he find a place for the sole of his foot in everything that he has made, but he can make solid ground for us to walk upon when he calls. The challenge of faith is to hear Jesus’ call and obey. I suspect not many of us will find we walk on water, but the miracle we will find is that we are changed from the inside out. Relying on him, we’ll be freed from relying on ourselves, which is to say we’ll be freed from pride and selfishness, and released to love our neighbours. In fact if you want to see God at work then you have to step out in faith. You won’t experience God’s power if you stay sitting on your bum in safety.

What does Jesus say to Peter? **Come.**

Incredibly Peter gets out of the boat and steps out towards Jesus. Jesus’ call to Peter is his call to each of us.

He saw the wind - keeping your eyes fixed on Jesus

But when Peter saw the wind and the waves, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said. “Why did you doubt?”

I love this moment, because it speaks to the reality of our experience of faith. The storms of life. The doubts we have. They are real. They threaten to overwhelm us. It is not safe outside the boat. But Jesus is always there. He is stronger. It’s only when we keep our eyes fixed upon

him and not the storm around us that we'll be able to step forward. And when we falter His hand is always there to catch us.

The encounter ends with Jesus and Peter climbing back into the boat. The wind dies down. **33** *Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."* Peter has encountered Christ. He stepped out in faith. Jesus has caught him when he is sinking, now back in the boat Peter and the disciples worship Christ. The encounter ends with corporate worship. This is a picture of the church. To step out in faith is personal, but it's not in the end private. It has to be corporate. You have to get into the boat with the others. That means coming to church. It's here in the church that we see Christ at work in the lives of our spiritual sisters and brothers. It's here that we find peace in the storm because indeed Christ is here with us.

What Peter and his disciples encountered that hour before dawn on the Sea of Galilee is no less real that what we encounter today. The same Jesus who spoke to them in the midst of the storm, speaks his words to us today. **Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid.** The same Jesus who called Peter to step out of the boat calls to you and I today: **Come.** Will you hear his call? Will you take that step of faith, and entrust yourself to the one with whom you will always find solid ground? Will you join together with the disciples, and all who have found his hand grasping theirs in the storm, and worship him who is here with his church?