

Sermon for the 9th Sunday after Trinity (13th August 2017)

Reading (Morning Praise):

Matthew 14:22-33

It may help you to have a Bible open at our reading – Matthew 14 v 22, on page 15 of the New Testament section. If you were following that reading in a Bible, you may have noticed that what was read from our lectionary book contained a few words that aren't actually in the Bible! It began, "Immediately after feeding the crowd with the five loaves and two fish..." – the words "after feeding the crowd with the five loaves and two fish" have been added. They're not in the Bible at that point.

The lectionary book does that sometimes, to help us understand what is going on. Otherwise, unless you were following it in the Bible, beginning the reading "Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat" would leave us wondering, "Immediately – after what?"

But our story follows the story of Jesus feeding the 5000, and if we hadn't celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration with Bishop Richard last Sunday we would instead have been looking at the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 then. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on that story now, but it does help to know a bit about it in order to understand our story for today – which, as Matthew tells us, took place after it, "immediately".

The story of the feeding of the 5000 begins, not with Jesus standing up before a crowd to preach, but with him hearing about the death, indeed, the execution, of his friend and relative John the Baptist. If you've got the Bible open you can see that back in v 10-13. And what Jesus did when he heard about that was to try to get away – "he withdrew...in a boat to a deserted place by himself"¹. It seems the disciples, though they were around, kept their distance – perhaps they understood what Jesus wanted to do. After all, that's just the kind of thing any of us might want to do when we learn of the death of someone dear to us – spend time quietly on our own, maybe weeping, maybe praying.

But though the disciples might have kept a respectful distance, the crowds didn't. They managed to follow him and were waiting for him when he went ashore at what he had hoped was going to be a deserted place. And he had compassion on them; he spent time with them, healing the sick². In the evening the disciples came near and said, what about some food for all these? And Jesus fed them³.

Eventually, when it was all over, Jesus tried again for some quiet moments. This is where our story begins. He made the disciples go on ahead of him in the boat and sent the crowds away. Whether he thought how he was going to catch up with the disciples later we are not told; what we are told is that he went up the mountain by himself to pray. As it says in v 23, he was there alone.

¹ Matthew 14:13

² Matthew 14:14

³ Matthew 14:15ff

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Jesus at last got what he needed – time, maybe, to weep and mourn, and certainly, time to pray. It seems he spent most of the night doing that – it says it was “early in the morning” that Jesus actually appeared walking on the lake, but the words translated “early in the morning” are literally “in the 4th watch of the night” which would have been between 3am and 6am. Jesus had been on his own in the deserted place for several hours. And this is not the only occasion in the Gospel stories when we are told Jesus went away for a lengthy time to pray.

Prayer for Jesus was serious business. It wasn't just a quick little job to do at the beginning or end of each day like cleaning your teeth or washing your face. It was something bigger than that, it was something he wanted to do – something that was important to him – and it needs to be that for us as well. Perhaps we don't need to be up all night praying as it seems Jesus was on this occasion. But it needs time to be given to it. While there is something to be said for making prayer a regular habit that you do every morning or evening (or both), I wonder if there is a risk that it then becomes like the other things we have to do regularly – like cleaning our teeth or washing our faces – one of the daily chores – rather than being a key part of our day, something to look forward to, even.

But we've only just begun to look at our story. After Jesus' night of prayer he needed to get back with his disciples – and, in the meantime, they had got into a spot of bother. They were in the boat, a long way from the shore, battling against a headwind and battered by the waves. It had happened before⁴, but then, Jesus had been with them in the boat and had stilled the storm.

Whether Jesus had always intended to catch them up by walking across the water we don't know, but they needed him now – and he was on his way. But initially their anxiety was only heightened by seeing what looked like a ghostly apparition speeding towards them across the waves; what a relief when he called out, “It is I; do not be afraid.”

I'm sure most of us have had the experience of being disturbed, perhaps by a loud noise or an unexpected movement, which makes us wonder what has fallen over or who is breaking in, only to be reassured a moment later by seeing a familiar face or hearing a familiar voice calling out, “It's all right, it's only me!” That must have been how the disciples felt. And they probably also thought, it meant help is at hand.

“It is I; do not be afraid,” says Jesus. He's not a ghost, or anything else remotely frightening; he's someone the disciples knew and loved, and someone we know and love as well. Jesus is someone who is familiar to us, often coming to help – not someone to be afraid of. And, going back to the point about prayer, the more we pray, the more familiar he becomes. We don't come to church, or to a time of prayer, to grovel before a stern God, but to spend time with someone who loves us – and someone who will help us when we get into trouble. Yes, maybe there are times when we do feel we can only grovel. But, like the father in the story of the prodigal son⁵, Jesus isn't interested in us grovelling. He just wants to take us in his

⁴ See Matthew 8:23ff

⁵ See Luke 15:20

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arms – even if, at the same time, he wants to change us and renew us. As the hymn we have just sung reminds us, there's a wideness in his mercy, and we sometimes think of his love as too narrow⁶.

It's worth noting that the words translated "it is I" are the same words that, elsewhere, are translated "I am" – the phrase Jesus used to introduce sayings like "I am the good shepherd"⁷ and "I am the way, and the truth, and the life"⁸, and indeed the name by which God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush⁹. Whether Jesus intended, or the disciples understood, what Jesus said on this occasion to imply more than just "Hi, it's me" we can't be sure, but from our perspective we can certainly read into this that it is God in his fullness, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of whom we do not need to be afraid – even if we do need to show due reverence.

But, of course, the story goes on. Peter, ever the impetuous one, says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." What was behind this? Was Peter trying to test the figure coming towards them to see if it really was Jesus? A risky way to do it if he was. Was he just trying to impress himself, Jesus and the others with his faith? We can't be sure, but, if impressing people was his aim, he soon fell short. He took his mind off Jesus and thought of the wind – and began to sink.

But Jesus caught him and rescued him – even if not without a mild rebuke. The incident foreshadows Peter's denial of Jesus before the crucifixion – another impetuous action, making a promise he would fail to keep – and be restored from¹⁰. Here on the lake, Jesus was prepared to accept Peter's act of faith, however pointless or ill advised – and was prepared to accept him and save him when he failed.

And that's the point. Jesus is prepared to work with and use failures – people who are going to lose faith at the crucial moment even if they make brave offers to begin with. And that's just as well, because that's people like us. We make commitments of faith in church, to each other, in our prayers – but we don't always live up to them when the pressure is on. Jesus knows that. Of course, he'd love us to be true to what we say we believe or think is right – but, when we fail, he is ready to forgive us and pick us up off the ground and let us have another go.

It's likely Matthew wrote his Gospel for a particular church community – almost certainly the one he was part of himself. It was probably a community he wanted to encourage in prayer, as Jesus prayed. It was probably a community to whom he wanted to communicate that Jesus, that God, was not someone to be afraid of but someone who loved and cared for them – "it is I, do not be afraid". They were probably a church under duress – persecuted in some way – represented here by the boat tossed by the wind and waves – and they needed

⁶ There's a wideness in God's mercy (FW Faber) Mission Praise 683

⁷ John 10:11

⁸ John 14:6

⁹ See Exodus 3:14

¹⁰ Matthew 26:33-35, 69-75; John 21:15-19

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to be assured Jesus would help them. They were ordinary folk whose faith was probably tested and who often failed to live up to all they believed – like Peter – but Jesus would save and restore them – he doesn't give up on people.

But, perhaps the thing Matthew wanted his church to do most of all was to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God and to worship him – as the disciples in the boat did at the end of our story. The miracle of feeding the 5000, Jesus' coming to their aid walking on the water, his words of assurance – “it is I, do not be afraid” – and his saving of Peter, not to mention the fact that, at the end, the wind dropped as it had on the previous occasion they were all in the boat together with Jesus – all these things – had begun to register with the disciples. They were beginning to know Jesus for who he was, the Son of God – and to know him was, after all, what would prepare them to make him known. Matthew hoped his church would do just that; it was why he wrote his Gospel. That is the Gospel message, the good news, for us as well, and which we, too, need to make known.