



The Methodist Church

Nottingham North East Circuit - Sunday 9th August 2020

This short act of worship, based on the service which would have been held at Church today, has been prepared for you by Rev John Wiseman, to use at home. If you are well enough, why not spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

Let's begin by singing together a familiar favourite STF 20

Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The holy One, is here;
Come bow before him now
With reverence and fear
In him no sin is found
We stand on holy ground.

Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The holy One, is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around;
He burns with holy fire,
With splendour he is crowned:
How awesome is the sight
Our radiant king of light!

Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place:
He comes to cleanse and heal,
To minister his grace -
No work too hard for him.
In faith receive from him.

Be still, for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place.

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Opening prayer: psalm 85

¹Lord, you were favourable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. ²You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. Selah ³You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger. ⁴Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us.

⁵Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? ⁶Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? ⁷Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.

⁸Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

⁹Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

¹¹Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

¹²The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. ¹³Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.

Today's reading: Matthew 14:22-33

Then Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people away. ²³ After sending the people away, he went up a hill by himself to pray. When evening came, Jesus was there alone; ²⁴ and by this time the boat was far out in the lake, tossed about by the waves, because the wind was blowing against it.

²⁵ Between three and six o'clock in the morning Jesus came to the disciples, walking on the water.

²⁶ When they saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. "It's a ghost!" they said, and screamed with fear.

²⁷ Jesus spoke to them at once. "Courage!" he said. "It is I. Don't be afraid!"

²⁸ Then Peter spoke up. "Lord, if it is really you, order me to come out on the water to you."

²⁹ "Come!" answered Jesus. So Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water to Jesus.

³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he was afraid and started to sink down in the water. "Save me, Lord!" he cried. ³¹ At once Jesus reached out and grabbed hold of him and said, "What little faith you have! Why did you doubt?"

³² They both got into the boat, and the wind died down. ³³ Then the disciples in the boat worshiped Jesus. "Truly you are the Son of God!" they exclaimed.

Let's sing again....a new song but to the familiar tune 'Alleluia sing to Jesus, his the sceptre, his the throne

Jesus in a boat was preaching
on a lake called Galilee;
Later, Christ with hand out-reaching
called to Peter in the sea.
Frightened by a storm they called him,
"Master, will you let us drown?"
In that boat there, Jesus awed them;
he said "Peace!" The winds calmed down.

When the storms of life are blowing
and your church knows doubt and fear,
Lord, may we find peace in knowing
you command a safe ship here.
May we hoist the sails, relying
on your Spirit, steady, true.
See! This ship is almost flying!
May we place our trust in you.

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Today's message

Today's reading is probably one of the most familiar stories that we know in the NT. Jesus walks on the water and Peter doesn't manage quite as well. It is a story perhaps so familiar that I wonder if quite often familiarity breeds contempt. I wonder if there is a temptation for a congregation to switch off believing that because they have heard it all before, they will hear nothing new and also switching off from the point of view of the preacher during his / her preparation believing that they will be unable to produce any new insights from such a well known passage

So today I am simply hoping to get you to think about just two things that crop up in this passage.

1st What is the significance for a Jewish audience that Jesus walks on the water?

2nd Did Peter succeed or fail when he got out of the boat and tried to do the same?

Considering the geographical location in which Jesus lived and where he carried out his ministry it is perhaps not surprising that some of the most remarkable events that have been recorded about him were ones associated with waterJesus calms the storm an event recorded in mark 4 Matthew 8 and Luke 8 and as we have heard in our reading today Jesus also walks on water as described in Mark 6, John 6 and as we have heard in Matthew 14

Is this just a coincidence? Is this just because of where Jesus lived and travelled? Or is there perhaps a much greater significance to these miraculous events than we may at first see?

Living roughly 60 miles from the coast I guess the power of the sea is not something that is immediately obvious to folks living in Nottingham. The closest we get is probably through TV reports of adverse weather and whilst we might associate rough seas with the occasional disaster I doubt that many of us would associate it with ?????

If you had lived just over 2000 years ago and if you have been brought up in the Jewish faith, one of the things you would have been brought up to believe as part of your faith was that the sea was a place associated with evil, a place where demons lived and were active. And as former fishermen, some of the disciples would have known all about the power and danger of not just the sea but inland lakes such as the Sea of Galilee where winds would whip down from the surrounding hills and turn that stretch of water into something that even the most hardened of fishermen would fear to venture.

And it is not just a belief that is restricted to the Jewish faith because ancient creation myths from neighbouring countries, cultures and faiths describe that when God separated the land from the sea God had to battle the monstrous forces of

chaos that lived in and were associated with the waters of the sea.

It is a battle that is recorded in many verses of the psalms and the prophets especially during times when Israel was subject to war, invasion or persecution. Frequently the psalmists and prophets would remind their audience of what God has done in the past and in turn implored God to act in the same way in their day.

Psalm 89:8-10

⁸ Who is like you, LORD God Almighty?
You, LORD, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you. ⁹ You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.
¹⁰ You crushed Rahab like one of the slain; with your strong arm you scattered your enemies.

Rahab was of course one of the names of the sea monster that was a representation of chaos itself with which God had to do battle.

And also in psalm 107: 26-29 we read...

In their peril their courage melted away.
²⁷ They reeled and staggered like drunkards; they were at their wits' end.
²⁸ Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress.
²⁹ He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed.

The conclusion drawn from the history of the Jewish faith tradition is simple. God alone rules the waves. God alone defeated the primordial sea monster. God alone can defeat the demonic powers of evil and chaos. So the sight of Jesus having mastery over nature, either quieting storms with a swift rebuke or walking on water in the middle of the night, would have raised an almost unthinkable conclusion in their minds. Jesus walks on the water as only God can do.

Jesus greets his terrified friends with the words "it is I" which echoes the "I am" revelation of God's presence as revealed in Exodus. Furthermore Jesus' declaration to "fear not" recalls the pronouncement in Isaiah 43 when God says fear not...you are mine...when you walk through the waters, I shall be with you"

Here on the middle of this windswept lake, in the middle of the night, in the most unlikely way, in the figure of Jesus is 'Immanuel' God present and with them in their midst.

Most people reading this story will perhaps view it as being a story of one miracle and one failure. The miracle is often seen as Jesus walking across the surface of the lake, whilst Peter's rapid sinking beneath its surface is seen as the failure. But I wonder if Peter really did fail?

Over the next few chapters in Matthew's gospel we begin to see Peter increasingly come to the fore in leading the disciples...we see examples of this in chapters 15-19 and in most but not all cases such episodes are only reported in Matthew's gospel. Matthew's gospel is perhaps the main one which highlights Peter's emergence as a leader, as the one who will venture out where others fear to tread, who will take that leap...sometimes a leap of faith on other occasions simply a leap with both feet first without apparently thinking of the consequences.

During these chapters of Matthew's gospel we get a good view of the people who will form the early church and of one of its leaders Peter.

Here in this story Peter's enthusiasm for Jesus really does go overboard both figuratively and literally. And I think one of the reasons that Peter strikes such a chord with many Christians is that in Peter they can see something of themselves ...Peter is impulsive, he is committed, he is enthusiastic and at the same time he is oh so ordinary, so vulnerable, so fragile.

Peter has a real rollercoaster of a spiritual journey with the most incredible highs and lows coming one after another. He is a blend of devotion and disaster. All too often looking at Peter is for many Christians like looking in a mirror.

And this is one passage that can invoke very different responses in the reader or hearer. Some people react very negatively to what Peter did, calling him impulsive, headstrong and even foolish for even wanting to walk on water. Some even suggested that Peter thought he was better than the others disciples. Yet I think such a reading completely misses the point as there is nothing in

the text that even remotely suggests that Peter was wrong for wanting to walk on water.

At this point Peter is not being impetuous, impulsive, headstrong or foolish. Matthew is very clear that Peter asks for permission first. Peter says "if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water" If Jesus had said no, then Peter would have stayed in the boat. But Jesus didn't

Peter steps out of the boat in response to Jesus' single word "come". We are not sure if this is a command or an invitation....whatever it is clear that Peter's first response is one of obedience. It's not as if Peter just jumps out of the boat and starts walking. That would have been presumptuous and foolish.

Peter doesn't seem to question that what he is being asked to do defies all the known laws of physics, defies everything that Peter's former profession as a fisherman must have drilled into him. The miracle that is being played out here is not that Jesus is walking on the water but that Jesus invites Peter and us to do the same.

Peter is keen to accept Jesus' invitation but at the moment of truth, perhaps his background as a fisherman and knowledge of the dangers of the sea came back to haunt him, and as it does so his feet begin to disappear beneath the surface of the water. Peter panics and as he does so he suddenly becomes aware of the waves and wind around him....the same wind and waves that have been present with just the same force and ferocity when he managed to take his first few steps across the surface of the lake

Peter has as I am sure we have all been told many, many times taken his eyes, his focus, his concentration of Jesus. And as a result he suddenly starts to sink, starts to fail. But perhaps we shouldn't forget that being a Christian, having faith in Jesus, trusting Jesus, following Jesus doesn't mean we will be guaranteed instant success. Sometimes we will fail and perhaps it is partly through our failures that our faith, our trust, our belief will develop and mature. Yet no matter how many times we do stumble, we can always be sure that Jesus is there to catch us as we fall

Peter's attempts to walk on water can be seen by some as a failure but before we leave this familiar

story, let me leave you with two observations about Peter.

Please remember that the story we have heard this morning is not called the story of Bartholomew, Matthew, James or John walking on the water . . . because they all stayed firmly in the boat.

This is about Peter walking on the water . . . because Peter was the only one with the courage to get out of the boat. Maybe some of the others wanted to, maybe some of them would have followed if Peter had stayed afloat a little bit longer. But at the end of the day Peter did it, and they didn't. That's why this story is about him and why the other 11 aren't even mentioned by name in this story.

And before we criticize Peter for having "little faith," we'd better remember that a "little faith" is better than "no faith," because at least Peter was prepared to put what little faith he had into action. When Jesus describes Peter as having "little-faith," he was not rebuking Peter for attempting too much, but for trusting too little.

Do you see the difference? Jesus is not saying, "Peter, you should have stayed in the boat." *Jesus did not rebuke Peter for getting out of the boat.* To the contrary, Jesus is really saying, "Peter, if you had just kept your eyes on me, you could have walked across the sea of Galilee, could have walked across the river Trent, could have skipped along the waves at Skegness

Peter's faith is like the nets he used to fish with, patchy, full of holes, insecure, incomplete yet he is still trusted by Jesus to be the rock on which the church will be built.

It doesn't mean that Peter is going to succeed in everything he does. What it does mean is that if Peter tries and begins to fail he will be rescued. Jesus will be there to lift him out of the depths. Again and again and again and again

So today as we navigate these uncertain and occasionally rough waters of emerging from lockdown what boat are we travelling in?

Who are our fellow disciples accompanying us?

What are the storms that are raging around us,
threatening to capsize us?

What is the invitation that Jesus is making to us?

What is our response?

Do we want to attempt to defy the logic of this
secular society in which we live?

Do we want to try and attempt the impossible?

Are we ready to take that first step in obedience, in
faith, in trust?

Because if we want to learn how to walk on the
water, first and foremost we have to have the faith
to take a step out of the boat. **Amen**

Prayers of Intercessions

We pray for...

- The stories that have been dominating our
newspapers over the past week
- For those struggling to take a leap of faith
- For those offering guidance and support
during these uncertain times
 - We pray for our local community
 - For our church family
 - For those dear to us

And finally we join our voices to say The Lord's
Prayer together...Our Father

Let's conclude this worship by singing STF 661

Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;
Give me the childlike praying love,
Which longs to build thy house again;
Thy love, let it my heart o'er-power,
And all my simple soul devour.

I would the precious time redeem,
And longer live for this along,
To spend and to be spent for them
Who have not yet my Saviour known;
Fully on these my mission prove,
And only breathe, to breathe thy love.

My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
Into thy blessed hands receive;
And let me live to preach thy word,

And let me to thy glory live;
My every sacred moment spend
In publishing the sinner's Friend.

Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
With boundless charity divine,
So shall I all my strength exert,
And love them with a zeal like thine,
And lead them to thy open side,
The sheep for whom the Shepherd died.

And a final blessing...

Go into this day to love, those you
already do and those you sometimes
struggle to do. for it is in Jesus name
that you go. Amen