

13 August 2023

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

He was a very simple old sailor, the skipper of the small boat that was taking them to the Shetlands, and they were a young, lively party, actors and actresses from London on tour, going to do a night or two on the Islands. They were not above 'taking the mickey' a bit, and they thought his habit of saying grace before meals very quaint and old fashioned. However, before long, a storm blew up, a really severe north-easter, and as the little ship began to pitch more and more violently, morale among the visitors got lower and lower.

A small deputation went up to ask the Captain's opinion.

"Well," he said, "maybe we'll get through, and maybe we won't. I never remember such a storm." The news was greeted with dismay down below, and finally another deputation went up to the bridge to ask whether the captain would be so good as to come and say a prayer with his terrified passengers. His reply was simple: "I say my prayers when it's calm; and when it's rough, I attend to my ship."¹

"I say my prayers when it's calm; and when it's rough, I attend to my ship."

I think there is a great deal of truth we can take from the old sailor's reply as it puts the spotlight on aspects of today's Gospel reading.

The setting is the conclusion of the feeding of the 5000. Jesus sends the disciples on ahead of him, by boat, while he dismisses the crowd. He then goes up on a mountainside to pray. Jesus makes for himself a space of calm, and uses it to invest in prayer.

Like the sailor, Jesus takes time in prayer to equip himself for ministry in the rough times and places. It is all too easy for us to reserve prayer for when we are overwhelmed. And this is not to say that we shouldn't pray in the hard times: on the contrary, this is when we do cry out, with Peter, "Lord, save me!"

¹ Anon, *I say my prayers when it's calm*, cited in Dale, *Windows*, p.111 (slightly adapted)

This is not about either/or; it is about ensuring that the both/and has an appropriate balance. So often, self-absorbed as we are, we neglect our relationship with God in the good times; and then call on him earnestly in the bad.

Isn't it better that we be cultivating a relationship with God and Jesus when things are easy, so that we are calling on a friend rather than a stranger when we are in need?

“I say my prayers when it's calm; and when it's rough, I attend to my ship.”

The other point that the sailor's phrase helps me remember is that we have a work to do. Just as with the Transfiguration last week, in this passage Jesus comes down from the mountain, from a time of special intimacy with God, and sets out again into the ordinary stuff of life and its troubles. The grace offered over the sailor's food is a symbol and reminder that “all that exists is God's gift to humankind, and it all exists to make God known to humankind, to make the human's life *communion* with God”.² The simple prayer of grace is a reminder for the sailor that the daily work, nourished by the food he gives thanks for, is connected with God's work in the world; and when he rises from the table to attend to his ship, that activity too is a work of gratitude. The relationship with God and Jesus that we maintain and cultivate through prayer is a relationship with purpose; we all have our “ships” to attend to for God.

When Peter starts to walk on the water, in the midst of the buffets of wind and waves, he is initially successful. However, he becomes afraid and starts to sink “when he saw and wind.” It is when he takes his eyes off Jesus that he begins to sink. When he starts to focus on the trouble, on the things that would cause him to doubt, and takes his focus away from the one who had already demonstrated his power over these very things, Peter finds he is no longer walking *on* the water, but is now floundering in, and increasingly under, it.

Our life of prayer, bringing us into deeper and deeper relationship with God in Christ Jesus, helps us to fix our eyes on him and to keep our eyes on him even when we are attending to our ships in rough weather.

² Schmemmann, *Life*, p.21 (language modernised).

Let us not be too hard on Peter, however. He had plenty of reason to doubt, to become afraid. After all, he, along with the other disciples, was on the water at night-time in the midst of a storm. While he was a fisherman, in many ways used to this environment, even on a good day this vast watery expanse spoke of unseen danger. Not only were storms apt to arise very rapidly here given Galilee's particular microclimate, there was a deep primal fear attached to seas and lakes. The sea was seen as the home of evil spirits. In Hebrew and Jewish consciousness, the sea always carried the symbolic threat of chaos and evil. All this would have been enough reason to have doubts. But on top of this, Peter is now in a completely new situation, doing something he has never done before – he is *walking* on the water. Not only has *he* never done it, no-one in his experience has ever done it before. It is no wonder, really, that he, suddenly conscious of the waves, becomes fixated on the impossibility of what he is doing and the danger he is now in.

Peter's experience is ours too: when we look at the things we face, we find that we have plenty of reasons for courage to fail us, for us to doubt that we will ultimately get through.

I considered pausing here to name some examples of the things that cause us to have fear and to doubt.

But I resolved not to, because to do so would encourage you and I to be like Peter, not merely glancing at these waves, but suddenly focussed on them.

Instead, let us focus on Jesus.

And this, much more than any point I've made so far, is by far and away the most important point we can take from this event.

The most important point is summarised at the conclusion of the passage: "Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

It is entirely possible that Jesus sent the disciples ahead in the boat so that he could come to them walking on the water, engineering this scene so that they would come

to exactly the conclusion they end up breathlessly proclaiming – “Truly you are the Son of God.”

As he walks on the water Jesus is re-enacting what Genesis describes God doing at creation:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.”³

In the book of Job, Job talks expansively of God’s great power as creator, and among other things mentions that God “alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.”⁴ Later, when God questions Job about his qualifications to judge the ways of the cosmos, God asks Job if he ever “went upon the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep.”⁵ Now, to the astonishment of the disciples in the boat, here is Jesus doing exactly that. Jesus has God’s authority over the created order.

But they don’t “get it” at first. The disciples think they see a ghost, and are terrified. Jesus moves to reassure them, saying, “Take courage. It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Now it is not clear in the English translation, but in the Greek the “It is I” of Jesus is literally “*I am*” – the same words that God uses to identify himself to Moses at the burning bush.⁶ If walking on water weren’t enough to reflect his divine status, Jesus takes on the very name God uses for himself!

“Truly you are the Son of God!” So proclaim the disciples after Jesus has revealed himself and has saved Peter’s life.⁷ This same proclamation will be heard again at the moment of Jesus’ death. When Jesus yielded up his spirit and creation was shaken to its foundations⁸, a centurion and those guarding Jesus at the cross

³ Genesis 1:1, 9

⁴ Job 9:8

⁵ Job 38:16

⁶ Exodus 3:14

⁷ The following closely follows Schaser “Commentary”

⁸ Matthew 27:50-51

declare “Truly this was the Son of God”.⁹ During Jesus’ trial and suffering, the chief priests, scribes and elders unknowingly recall the moment of Jesus saving Peter (and his saving of many others in other ways), when they scoff “He saved others; he cannot save himself.”¹⁰ Yet, the centurion’s proclamation of divine sonship at the cross confirms that by *not* saving himself from crucifixion Jesus continues to save others – not from death by drowning, as he did for Peter, but from the death-dealing power of sin and evil. In the beginning of the Gospel the angel announces to Joseph that the one he will take into his care as his son is to be given the name Jesus, “because he will save his people from their sins,”¹¹ and the re-iteration of Jesus’ status as “Son of God” at the cross indicates that he has accomplished this salvation through his death.

This is the Jesus, and this is the God, to whom we address our prayers and with whom we cultivate, day by day, a fuller relationship. We do so when it is calm, so that in all the rough seas of life we can keep our gaze fixed on him rather than on what threatens us. With our gaze fixed on him, we can attend to our ship, our work, the reason we are called into relationship in the first place. We can attend to our ship, our work, our life, without fear because we are in the hands of the One who created it and has power to save us from evil: the Son of God.

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⁹ Matthew 27:54

¹⁰ Matthew 27:42

¹¹ Matthew 1:21