

## **Sermon for Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> August 2020, Andrew Watts**

### **Matthew 14: 22 - 33 'Walking on Water'**

#### ***Epistle: Romans 10:5 - 15***

The Sea, or Lake, of Galilee is a real place, we can visit it. When Angela and I had a trip on a boat on the Sea of Galilee, fortunately the sea was very calm. In the slight mist hanging over the water we could see the coast in the distance. And it was there in that place and on the surface of that water, that the disciples said Jesus walked. Significantly the event took place at night. It was still dark: Matthew notes that it was before dawn. And the sea was rough because the wind was blowing and making it difficult for the fishermen to make any headway. It seems also that Matthew is not going to let us get away with any easy explanations, for he underlines the fact that 'the boat was a considerable distance from land'.

I realised that in my first thoughts about this event I was fixing on what happened on the surface of the water. When Jesus approached the boat, was it as though he was walking on a solid surface rather than a liquid one? Perhaps I was influenced by a typically scientific approach, though I'm no scientist. What happens to human feet on the surface of a body of water?

I don't think the disciples would have been that precise. Of course they knew everything that they needed to know about the human body and its relationship with deep water. It is highly likely that sometime during their lives the disciples would at least have heard of someone being drowned on the lake.

But their view of the world was not simply a physical view. Beyond the physical they believed that there was a spiritual dimension. Into their world picture they would have fitted at least two concepts – the heavens and the depths. This is what Paul, referring to OT passages from Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Isaiah and Joel, writes about in our Epistle reading. He asks: to live a righteousness life, do we need to

rise into the heavens, to the abode of God? Or to descend into the depths ... and so fathom the deep mysteries of life and death?

“The depths” is of course a metaphor. We can find it throughout the Old Testament, from the creation story, to the story of Jonah, to the poetry of the psalms. Like any good metaphor it has a powerfully physical presence. The depths, or the deep, is seen as water. Carl Jung described water as a living symbol in our collective human consciousness. It is a symbol of the vast world of feelings and dreams, which is just as much a part of our lived experience as the physical world is. And there are places there to which we human beings can sometimes sink, from which all we can do is cry out to God. “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.” (from Psalm 130.) What I am suggesting about the effect of these thoughts on this gospel story, is that the disciples did not see Jesus walking on the surface of the water, as though it was some kind of experiment to prove scientifically that he had the power to defy the laws of physics. What they saw was Jesus walking in ‘the depths’.

This event is reminiscent of that other incident in a boat on the Lake. A terrifying storm and Jesus asleep in the boat. The disciples cry out in fear, “We are going to drown!” Well that is the way my version of the Bible puts it, but the word used by Matthew is far stronger than that. It is a word which means we are going to be lost, ruined, totally destroyed. To lose everything that makes us human. Given over to the eternal misery of separation from God. That was the metaphorical meaning that all too easily welled up in the disciples’ minds as they faced that nightmare storm on the lake. And Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith, for in their fear they were suggesting that it was possible for them to fall away from God’s loving care completely.

In today’s story, as the disciples saw Jesus walking in that place, no wonder they were terrified and, as our gospel reading said, “they cried out in fear”.

During this pandemic many of our fellow human beings have sunk into the depths as the virus took control. Not just the patients but their families too as they heard the news that their loved one had had to be transferred to Intensive Care and then put on a ventilator. The story of the disciples seeing Jesus walking on the Lake is a story for them. It is a story about crying out, about calling on the name of the Lord. That is the way Paul described our human response in his letter. And Peter calls out “Lord if it is you, tell me to come to you”. He becomes overwhelmed and begins to sink and so he cries out again “Lord save me”.

What do we need when we begin to sink into the depths? I mean the spiritual depths into which we, like the psalmists and the disciples, can sink. When there seems to be no solid ground underneath our feet, what do we need? We don't need a lecture on the laws of physics or biology. We don't even need to 'follow the science'. What we need is a hand reaching out. In the gospel story when Peter cried out to Him, “Jesus reached out his hand and caught him”.

Last week our brother-in-law, the husband of Angela's older sister, died. He was nearly ninety years old and he had not been well but nevertheless only the weekend before he was living at home and getting about. By being careful over these past months they had kept themselves free from the virus. But on the Wednesday of that week he had to go into hospital and on the Friday evening he died. The hospital was very good to the family and broke the rules by allowing Angela's sister and their children to sit with him. Their son was there at the end of the afternoon, and prayed with him. So at the end his was the human hand held out to his father in that mysterious, deep place. Our brother-in-law's name was Peter. When we came in the Zoom service last Sunday to sing the hymn 'Guide me O thou great Jehovah', I was thinking about Peter, especially as we came to the last verse:

*“When I tread the verge of Jordan, Bid my anxious fears subside:  
Death of death and Hell's destruction, Land me ... safe ... on Canaan's side”.*

We can pray and sing this in faith because of a promise, which Paul calls 'the Good news'. "If you declare with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Of course the question which arises is "Saved from what?" We will need to go back home and reading the whole letter to the Romans, particularly chapters 7 and 8, if we are to find Paul's answer to that. What our experience of life shows it cannot mean is that all those struggling in rough seas will not drown, nor all those infected by Covid19 will not die. The salvation which Paul is talking about is God's rescue plan from what he calls in chapter 8 'the law of sin and death'. Freedom from that law means that we can be filled with a spirit of indestructible life: "He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit, who lives in you." (Romans 8:11). As Paul warms to his theme the joy and glory of it sweeps over him so his eighth chapter ends with the triumphant cry:

*"I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth (the depths), nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord".*

This good news is what we are sent out to tell to people who live in the world of Covid19. Amen