

Matthew 14 – Walking on Water

Do windy days make children a little bit crazy? I think if you gathered a group of people, many of the parents – but almost everyone who had been a teacher – would agree. Some say children being unsettled by unsettled weather is a perfectly natural. Kids see the havoc outside and want to replicate it inside. Others think there is a scientific explanation; that lots of positively charged ions blowing around in the air can have a physiological effect, causing erratic or poor behaviour in certain populations.

As I listened to the discussions, last weekend and this weekend, about the changes and challenges facing the church now, I was struck by how frequently people used meteorological idioms; the winds of change, the storm outside, tumultuous events, battenning down the hatches etc. etc. Not only does unsettled weather unsettle us, but when we are unsettled, it seems we start talking about the weather!

We connect the two, so how appropriate that this morning's gospel lectionary reading is also about a storm.

And despite how familiar this story is – it is a Sunday School and is widely referenced in films and stories and jokes/memes – it is also an unsettling story. I am not just referring to Jesus' apparent ignorance of the laws of physics! But the unsettling questions that this story says about life in the kingdom of God.

The first thing unsettling to me about this story is its purpose! What is the point – the value – of Jesus walking on the water compared to the obvious point and value of feeding the five thousand plus - men, women and children – immediately before this, or “having compassion for them”, as it says in verse 14, “and curing their sick”. This is not to say that every miracle must justify itself – particularly to me – but I am uncomfortable with the idea that Jesus performed this miracle just to prove he was capable of it.

If we reflect on the third and fourth phrases of the Lord's Prayer, “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”; healing the sick and feeding the hungry and speaking out against injustice all would seem to be ways of bringing about the kingdom of God, of doing the will of God. But is it the will of God that we also take a walk on the waves?

The second thing that unsettles me is the language in the first verse of our passage. “Immediately,” verse 22 says, “*he made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.*” The NRSV translation, which we heard this morning, softens this verse. It is better translated, “Immediately, he forced the disciples to jump into the boat...until he might dismiss the crowd.” Jesus doesn't give the disciples a choice. He compels them to get into the boat and to leave him alone with the crowds.

I don't know about you, but this picture of the bossy Jesus, the directive Jesus, doesn't sit so easily with me. I tend to think of Jesus inviting us, welcoming us, calling us. So much so that a few years ago I changed a line in the last verse of ‘In Christ Alone’, a hymn we sing from time to time, from “Jesus commands my destiny...to Jesus invites my company.” This

seemed to me to be a better description of the life of faith, and yet here Jesus does command the disciples' destiny!

What does this story of the disciples being compelled to get into the boat, to leave, to face whatever awaits them out on the sea, mean for us as fellow disciples of Jesus? What does it mean for us as the church?

There are a couple of possible reasons for Jesus' actions. We know that he was seeking time alone. He had withdrawn in a boat, we're told in verse 13, to a deserted place by himself, but the crowd (& the disciples?) had followed him. And, after dismissing the crowd, in this morning's reading, he again withdraws – going up the mountain like Moses to be with God. The reason for this is the terrible and terrifying news of the death of his cousin, John the Baptist, at the hand of Herod. Perhaps this, too, explains his thinking in forcibly separating his key supporters, his disciples, from this crowd of 5,000 men. With all the political currents swirling around perhaps the situation is becoming too volatile – too tempestuous – and Jesus seeks to calm the potential political storm.

Which is why, thirdly, there is something unsettling about this account of the disciples caught in the storm.

Storms in the ancient world hinted at darker greater fears. Wild wind and rain, tumultuous waves, suggested that the dome God had created, to separate the waters above from the waters below, had been breached; that the waters had been unleashed. And the text emphasises the malevolent nature of the storm. The disciples' boat is being 'battered' by the waves, verse 24 says, (the Greek word *basanizo* literally means harassed and tormented) and the wind is against them (*enantios* suggests opposition or hostility).

And while the disciples being battered, Jesus, too, is tormented by his grief over John's death and, perhaps, his fear, his growing awareness of the inevitable consequence of his own ministry, for Herod is opposed to him.

It seems that this storm is physical manifestation of the political and spiritual and psychological forces arrayed against Jesus and his disciples, and when the gospel is written, the forces that are arrayed against Matthew's community.

But what the writer of Matthew tells us is that while the boat is being battered, Jesus withdraws to spend time with God. It is no accident that these two things happen at the same time. Prayer should be response – when we are sailing through fine weather, of course, and when we are being harassed and opposed. Prayer is our port in the storm.

I may have mentioned before that this is the practice of the Baptist churches in Papua New Guinea. Whenever they are facing opposition or dealing with difficult decisions in difficult times they send a church leader up a great mountain to spend the night in prayer. I am packing a little kit to go up Mt Ainslie, or I'm happy if you want to send someone else! Perhaps, seriously, a group of walkers and prayers might like to do this one weekend.

For sustained – literally buoyed up by his time of prayer – Jesus is able to navigate the wind and the waves, and he comes walking, through the storm, towards them on the sea. He is seen as being able to endure and pass through the storm of Herod's opposition

The disciples make the local assumption – based on where they are – what is arrayed against them – that the figure coming towards them is a spectre of death. What else could be present here in this storm? But Jesus speaks to them, in the greeting that God, and God's messengers, so often bring to anxious and frightened human beings, *"Take heart.... don't be afraid,"* and referring to himself, *"It is I" or "I Am"*. Neither the disciples nor the writer of Matthew's Jewish audience would mistake the pronouncement of the divine name. What the disciples – and we are meant to discover – is that even here in the chaos of the storm and a world ruled by Herods, God is present.

There is one more thing, however, that is unsettling about this story and that is Peter's actions in stepping out of the boat.

I can't say I have stepped out of very much...

And some people say that Peter does the wrong thing in stepping out of the boat. They say that he was questioning – doubting – Jesus, after all the NRSV translates verse 28, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

It seems to me that this is a fairly risky way to demonstrate doubt! And isn't a rather mean trick for Jesus to invite Peter to come if he isn't supposed to come? Though there seems to be some ambiguity, I believe that Jesus does invite Peter to take that step of faith over the gunwale and into the waves. He delights in Peter stepping – quite literally – into the unknown, trusting that even if he doesn't find safety, he will find God there.

As one commentator writes, "Isn't this what history's most faithful people have demonstrated? Not all of them were great believers, but they knew that if God might be encountered anywhere, God will be found in places where the regular delineations and predictable endings don't apply as before. Sometimes incredibly turbulent places are also "thin places," where God breaks through...These heroes of faith find and illuminate God in settings where "the way things are" are reconfigured: where the poor receive support, the sick find comfort, and the oppressed enjoy dignity and freedom."

Do we have the courage and the creativity to reconfigure our world, to enable the breaking in of the kingdom?

Did some of you see this story on the ABC news this week?

It was about the challenges for medical treatment in Cambodia where so much medical knowledge and medical professional were lost during the Khmer Rouge period, and about this famer, Eng Kheng., with a benign bone growth of his facial jaw bone, called fibrous dysplasia. ABC puts it "His cheeks bulged as if he was trying to swallow a large pink grapefruit, with sections pushing through his lips."

A group, I think based in the western suburbs of Adelaide, fundraised to bring him to Australia for surgery he could not get in Phnom Penh, In Kheng's words, "The operation was painless, I just fell asleep [and] dreamed I was in a big plane...When I woke up and saw my face it looked beautiful. I felt like I'd been born again."

What particularly caught my attention about this story was the name of the fundraising charity? Does anyone remember? Their name is 'Walk on Water'. What a beautiful name and what a wonderful way of reconfiguring the world – of challenging the way things are – to go about performing ordinary miracles like this.

Do we have the courage to ask God to 'command us' to step into the unknown?

I was reading William Barclay's commentary on Mark before the weekend, reflecting on the passage Ann had set for us, and he tells the story of the British theological and missiologist, Leslie Newbigin, who was involved with the formation of the United Church of South India and how during the discussions when people who keep asking, "Now, if we do that, just where are we going?" said quite bluntly, "The Christian has no right to ask where he is going."...Barclay comments, "If we are really to rise to the height of the Christian challenge, we must retain the adventurous mind. I received, he says "a letter which ended like this, "yours aged 83 and still growing" and indeed with the inexhaustible riches of Christ still before us, why not?"

I began this sermon wondering about the purpose of this story, asking what God might be saying to us in this story of Jesus walking on the water.

Perhaps we are being compelled, forced to step into the boat, to face the storms that come our way. There is no returning to Christendom.

Perhaps, too, we are urged to spend more time with God, that time spent with God will sustain us in the storm and open our eyes to seeing God and our world in new ways.

And perhaps we are being urged not only to step into the boat, but to step out of the boat, to have the courage to face the unknown, knowing that God, yes, will be there, but also that we are encouraged to discover that for ourselves.

In the series produced by Common Grace on the Lord's Prayer, Mark Coleridge, the Catholic Archbishop presents the one on, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven."

What he says relates to our call to step out of the boat and face the unknown. When we pray, he says, "Your kingdom come," it is first of all a cry for help – and God knows we need it. But it is also a statement of faith – your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' is a statement of what is possible, that we can with God create this world for which we so deeply long.