

Christ Church, Papakura
9 August 2020

Gen 37:1-4,12-28
Rom 10:5-15
Matt 14:22-33

The well-known Gospel story always makes me think of the window in **St Faith's Ohinemutu, Rotorua**.

For years, concern about the **pollution** of Lake Rotorua, with excessive nutrient levels and consequent growth of water weed..... Easy for Jesus to walk across the lake!

This story of Jesus on the water is often reduced to a debate on the **im/possibility** of anyone walking on water – and in the process, the point of the story is lost.

Helpful to remember the **cosmology of biblical times** – the way the universe was understood:

3 tiers – the flat disc of the earth in the middle; above is the arch of heaven, the dwelling-place of God above the stars and below is the mystery of the ocean depths where the powers of chaos and evil resided.

Mountaintops were regarded as special places where one could get close to God – just as Celtic Christians speak of '**thin places**' – hence Mt Sinai (10 commandments), transfiguration and ascension.

Deep water, on the other hand, was a place of fearfulness and danger, because of the immeasurable power and mystery and unpredictability of the ocean or large lake.

Not surprising that, through the centuries, **seafarers** have been deeply **religious/superstitious**.

If you Google 'Seafarer superstition' you find some of the things that have been believed over the years:

- Don't **whistle** – or the wind will get up
- Don't **clap** – thunder
- Don't let people with **red hair or flat feet** on board – bad luck
- To see an **albatross** is lucky, but to kill one is unlucky, because they carry the souls of dead sailors
- **Bananas** are unlucky – Spanish ships which sank carrying cargoes of bananas.
- **Renaming** a ship must be done very carefully by de-naming it first and then christening it again

I believe some of these ideas persist today amongst **boaties**.

In the gospel story, which immediately follows the feeding of the 5000, **Jesus** goes off by himself overnight: he climbs to the top of a mountain, or hill, where he will pray and feel the close presence of God,

The **disciples**, do the complete opposite: they spend the night out on the lake in a boat, close to the things they fear most – the chaos and unpredictability of wind and water.

And as a storm builds up, and their fear and superstition kicks in, when Jesus appears in the early morning, they think they're seeing a **ghost!** Not surprising.

Fear is the dominant emotion in this story:

*When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were, they were **terrified**....*

*And they **cried out in fear**.....*

*Jesus said 'Take heart.....**do not be afraid**'.....*

*And Peter, when he started walking toward Jesus, noticed the strong wind, he became **frightened** and started to sink....*

Those disciples certainly don't have a monopoly on fearfulness.

2000 years later, our daily news often feels like a **catalogue** of things to be fearful and anxious about.

In our own little country, at the bottom of the world, just think what we have dealt with over the past few years: **earthquakes, volcanic eruption, drought and floods, a major terrorist attack, and a pandemic.**

All this on top of what we usually worry about – our health and security, our finances, our kids and their education, our ageing parents, our jobs, the constant changes in our lives.

And **post-Covid Lockdown**, the level of uncertainty is still high and predicted to get higher still, as the full impact on the economy and our mental health is felt.

Think for a moment:

What is it that you fear the most right now.....what is it that most often keeps you awake at night?

(May be more than one thing, may be large and overwhelming, may be quite small.....)

Now put that thing/those things in your pocket/handbag for the moment.....

Let's imagine you are in the boat, on the stormy lake, with the 12 disciples.

You are sharing their terror. You're not sure when the storm will ease, or if it is getting worse.

And out in the wind and waves you catch sight of a familiar figure.....it **looks like Jesus**.....it IS Jesus!

And silly old impetuous **Peter** starts climbing over the side of the boat. He wants to walk on the water towards Jesus.

He must be crazy!

What if he wants you to go with him?

Would you join him?

Watch Peter now.

He's facing the fears of every sailor – **drowning**.

When he focusses on the waves and the wind – yes - he begins to **sink**.

But when he looks beyond his immediate fears to the figure of Jesus, he is **able to move forward**.

But notice.....Jesus is not miraculously stopping the storm. He isn't calming the seas and hushing the gale.

He isn't making the water solid.

He is simply there, watching.

And when Peter loses his nerve completely, Jesus holds out a hand.

It's a hand **up** – not a hand out.

Jesus is saving Peter **through** the storm, **not from** the storm.

Jesus is not dumbing the situation down - He is allowing Peter to **really experience what he is experiencing**.

And when Jesus' hand takes hold of Peter's hand, there is the bridging of an incredible gap – the gap between the loftiness of the mountaintop and the turbulence of the sea;

Between the majestic grace of God and the anxious details of human life.

Divine tranquillity and human angst come together.

And when Peter and Jesus finally join the others in the boat, an amazing thing happens:

Not only does the wind die down, but the disciples see Jesus in a **new light**.

And a story which begins and continues in a **frenzy of fearfulness**, ends in an atmosphere of **gratitude and worship**.

I wonder what it was that you named as the thing which keeps you awake at night, the thing that causes you fear right now.

I asked you to put it in your pocket/handbag for the time being.

Now this sermon has some **homework attached!**

I invite you later today or during the week, to read the gospel story again. Place yourself in the boat. Enter into the story as one of the characters.

Then imagine that the fear you have named is like the raging storm all around you.

You are Peter.

And you face your fear by climbing out of the boat into the thing you fear most.

But try to **focus** on the presence of Christ standing there with his hand out towards you.

Walk towards him through the thing that you fear most.

Take his hand when you need to.

And **listen** for what he has to say to you.

You might want to go through this little exercise more than once. You might be surprised what happens.

Let us pray:

A prayer written by St Benedict

Gracious and Holy God,
give us the wisdom to recognise You,
the intelligence to understand You,
the diligence to seek after You,
the patience to wait for You,
eyes to behold You,
a heart to meditate upon You,
and a life to proclaim You,
through the power of the Spirit of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.