

The message of today's Gospel passage challenges our inbuilt human tendency to demand proof for our faith; to ask that God would suspend the natural laws of his creation in order to make belief easier for us. So often we seek, not for faith, but for certainty. We have no problem when all in our lives is going smoothly; yet when the 'wind and waves' that are the realities of every human life threaten to swamp us – the experiences of loss, sickness, and ageing that are our common lot – we find it hard to hold on to faith.

This incident of the storm and of Jesus walking toward the disciples is also found in Mark's Gospel however, Mark has one significant difference: there is no mention of Peter attempting to walk on the water to Jesus. So why does Matthew record this?

The usual interpretation of this passage assumes that Peter would not have sunk in the waves if he had only had enough faith, and indeed, Jesus words would initially seem to suggest this. However, the disciple's lack of faith is also implicit in Mark's version, and does not need a description of Peter trying to walk on the water to make it so.

The American scholar Eugene Boring has suggested that Jesus' rebuke of Peter relates not to the fact that having more faith would have made walking on the water possible, but rather that Peter was demanding **proof** of Jesus' presence and power, rather than relying on his faith. Boring draws a parallel between the form of Peter's words to Jesus "Lord, **if** it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And the words of Satan to Jesus in the wilderness temptations "**If** you are the Son of God ... "

Peter's fear leads him to test and question Jesus's identity, instead of taking Jesus's self-disclosure at face value. If it's *you*, enable me to do the impossible. If it's you, reorder reality and prove to me that you're God. Peter's test fails. Jesus doesn't calm the sea for Peter's convenience. Even though Peter steps out of the boat, his circumstances remain wild and turbulent and dangerous. If Peter thinks he can manipulate Jesus into making faith easy, he was wrong. By demanding a miracle, Peter has fallen prey to the temptation to seek physical proof for his faith, and he is consequently rebuked by Jesus.

We are urged to hold on in faith, however bleak and unpromising are our circumstances. However strong the winds or overwhelming the waves, God always wills and can do that which is for our greatest good, if only we allow God's time for this to be – come.

Over and over again the message of the Bible is fear not. When Abram took his family to the Promised Land he feared that he was turning his back on everything he knew. God spoke to him: Fear not Abram, I am your shield and your reward will be great.

When the Jews stood at the Red Sea and could see Pharaoh's chariots coming on the horizon, they cried out that they would all be slaughtered. Moses said to them: Stand still, fear not, and see the salvation of the Lord. When the angel of the Lord came to Mary and said that she would bear a child, she trembled with fear. Said the angel: Fear not Mary, for you have found favour with God. Do not be afraid.

The scriptures make this announcement over and over again.

Angels and the resurrected Christ speak the language of not fearing. Not fearing life, not fearing the storms of life. This is the language of angels and of our Lord. Abraham, Moses, Mary, Joseph, shepherds tending their flocks, Paul sitting in a jail cell, the women looking for Christ's body at Easter, and disciples rowing a boat in the strong wind all hear these words.

The 18th century French Jesuit priest Jean – Pierre de Caussade when writing about the practice of faith in our daily lives said

God's will desires, and can always accomplish
what will contribute most to our perfection
on condition that we allow God to act.
Faith does not doubt this.

Once Peter is safe in the boat, Jesus asks him the question he can't answer:

"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

I wonder if Jesus's question means something like this:

Peter, as soon as you saw me, I told you exactly who I was.
You heard my voice.
I spoke words of assurance and comfort to you.
Why didn't you believe me?"

The power of this Gospel story does not lie in Peter's faith, doubt, courage, *or* fear. Peter's trajectory - fascinating though it is – is not the point of the Gospel. *Jesus's* trajectory is the point, because unlike Peter's, it never changes. It is constant, focused, relentless, and uni-directional.

From the very beginning of the Gospel, Jesus moves towards his disciples.

He moves towards them when they're struggling at sea.

He moves towards them when they decide he's a menacing ghost.

He moves towards them when they're terrified by his approach.

He moves towards them when they're reckless enough to dare him.

He moves towards them when they begin to drown.

He moves towards them when they ask for help.

He moves towards them when they're shivering and sorry for their rashness.

He moves towards them when they realise - for a beautiful, flickering instant – who he is and what he is.

He moves towards them when they worship him.

He never stops crossing the dark water to come to where we are. Neither our fearfulness nor our faithlessness ever alters his steady approach.

We are the ones he's bound for.

Our flailing bodies are the ones he pulls out of the water.

Ours is the boat he climbs into.

It is for us that he calls out across the terrifying waves, again and again and again:

Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid.

Wendy