

The 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 7th August 2011 – Faith, Doubt, and Getting Out of the Boat

Reading: Matthew 14: 22-33

“And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.”

If you were either here or at St Peter’s for the combined service last week you would have heard the story of the feeding of the five thousand, and if you were at St Peter’s you would have heard me talking about the main emphases of that story which actually run separately to the miracle itself for the most part. You would have heard me talk about the underlying narrative arc in Matthew’s gospel, which is just a fancy way of saying ‘story-line’. Part of that story-line is a progression in relation to the disciples and their perception of Jesus, shifting slowly from ignorance to understanding.

If you were there last week you would have heard me talking about the participatory nature of the feeding of the five thousand, wherein it’s actually the disciples who provide the food and feed the crowd. And you would have heard me talk about how from the disciples conviction that they don’t have enough comes plenty for all, and surplus besides. You would have heard about all that last week, and now you’ve heard it in a nutshell today.

The reason why everything from last week is significant is because what we hear in Matthew today flows straight on from all that. At the beginning of last week’s reading Jesus had just heard about the death of John the Baptist and was heading away by himself to mourn and to be quiet with God, but instead he ends up paying attention to the crowd. At the beginning of today’s reading we hear how he finally gets that time alone.

He dismisses the crowds and orders his disciples to go on ahead of him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, so they sail off while he heads up the mountain. We read that this happens before nightfall, and “When evening came, he was there alone – Jesus, up the mountain - but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.”

So the disciples have been stuck, out on the water, in high winds and heavy waves, all night. If you know the Sea of Galilee you’ll know this isn’t a very big expanse of water, so to be stuck out there all night means this was not a good thing, and then finally Jesus comes to them, walking across the water, and they’re terrified.

“It’s a ghost” they cry, but Jesus calls out “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” This phrase ‘do not be afraid’ comes up over and over again in Matthew’s gospel – the disciples get scared and Jesus tells them not to. Here though they obviously don’t recognise him at first, and even after he speaks they’re not sure, so Peter calls out, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” And Jesus says “come”. So Peter climbs out of the boat and starts to walk towards Jesus, over the water, but the wind’s still howling, and the waves are still rough, and Peter, walking on water in the middle of this sea, gets scared – who wouldn’t – and then he starts to sink. He cries out to Jesus, “save me” and Jesus grabs him and says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they got into the boat,

the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

There is just so much in this story, and it is all really important. Often when I've heard sermons on this reading they've focused on Peter bravely showing his faith by getting out of the boat and then taking his eyes off Jesus – letting that faith slip – and down he goes. The moral of that story, I've heard, is be courageous, step out of the boat, trust Jesus, but don't take your focus off him, and it's a good moral, but I honestly believe it misses the point, and to avoid that mistake we have to recognise the connections between today's reading and last week's reading and one other.

Just as the feeding of the five thousand is the first of two stories about feeding a crowd, this is the second of two stories involving Jesus, the disciples, a boat and inclement weather in Matthew's gospel. The first one, in Matthew 8, has Jesus sleeping in the back of the boat during a fierce storm, and just when the disciples think it's all over, he wakes up and calms the waves, and the story ends with them asking each other, who is this man "that even the winds and sea obey him?"

Now, this morning, we're on a different boat – I suppose – and again the wind and waves are causing problems, but much has changed since the last time. Firstly, Jesus isn't with them, he's on the mountain. The disciples are alone. Secondly, Jesus never tells the wind to cease, it just does so as soon as he gets into the boat. Thirdly, the response of the disciples this time is very different.

In the first storm story the disciples respond to what Jesus does with confusion, "who is this man?" This time they respond with worship, "And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." This is just one of two times in Matthew when we hear the disciples responding like this, the second is in chapter 28 after the resurrection, but the real significance here is that this story represents another step in the journey from ignorance to understanding that the disciples are travelling, and it's taking us steadily onwards towards the major turning point in this gospel, in chapter 16, when finally Peter declares to Jesus "You are the messiah." Everything else leads up to that moment and that declaration, and immediately after that Jesus begins to talk about his death and move towards Jerusalem and the cross.

Jesus isn't with them. Last week, in the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus works with the disciples to feed the crowd. They provide the food, they distribute the food, they collect the leftovers, Jesus just blesses it – says grace – and tells them it's enough. This week they're on their own.

How many of us have learned to ride a bike? Did you start by yourself? Or did you begin with training wheels and then dad, or maybe mum, walking then running along beside you, holding you upright, until they let go? Here Jesus lets go. He's not far away, he's still there when they need him, but he's no longer holding the bike.

Peter has a bit of faith and then he doubts. I've read commentators coming down on both sides of how much should we praise Peter for his actions in this story. Some say we should acknowledge his initial faith in stepping out of the boat, others point out that he's

already had plenty of experience of Jesus and he should never have doubted. Me, I'm kind of with Peter. I have faith. I believe God is with me. I believe we can do incredible, impossible things with Christ at our sides. I know we can step out of the boat, but sometimes I'm not sure. I believe, and I doubt. I have faith, and I doubt, and I suspect most of you can relate to that. But one of the most significant aspects of this reading for me is the juxtaposition of both those things. Peter may have doubted, just for a moment, but still he and his colleagues can worship Jesus as the son of God in the next sentence. I've often said, as many of you know, that the opposite of faith is not doubt, its certainty. Those things of which I am certain demand no faith from me, it's those things that I doubt that I need to have faith in.

In the feeding of the five thousand we found that from the disciple's scarcity came abundance, and from their doubt came a miracle. Today we discover recognition emerging from blindness and doubt leading to worship. And behind all these revelations is a journey.

It's no coincidence that one of the most common symbols for the early Church was a boat. Boats provide a place of safety and security from the crashing waves, but they are not a static symbol. The purpose of a boat is to be a vehicle that takes you somewhere. Maybe the most important question we could ask about today's reading is, "Why did Jesus and the disciples cross the sea?", and the answer, as we will see, is 'to get to the other side.' Why, because that's where their ministry was needed, that's where the journey continues, and this is where it continues today.

Where are our storms? What seas do we have to cross? What challenges lie ahead, and will we recognise Jesus when he walks towards us in the most unlikely ways and places? May God continue with us in our finding out. Amen.