

PETER THE WATER WALKER

In the modern idiom, walking on water means achieving difficult things without any problems, staying easily above all the problems and difficulties of life – just sliding over them. But, that wasn't really the experience of the disciples in our reading today. I must say that before I became a Christian I usually walked on water in the modern sense. I never had nearly as many problems and difficulties before I became a Christian as I experienced afterwards. I believe we all need to count the costs as well as benefits of becoming followers of Christ – although I completely believe that the benefits are incomparably greater than the costs. I wouldn't want to give up the incomparable joy of knowing our Lord Jesus Christ even to walk on water all the time.

So let's turn back and look at the experience of the disciples 2,000 years ago. The miraculous events in our reading today come just after another great miracle that Jesus performed – the feeding of the 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish.

These miracles were, at least partially, intended to be a learning and teaching experience for the disciples – so let's see what we can learn from them today. As we look at the events in more detail you might want to open your Bibles at page [***] so that you can follow them with me.

The first thing we notice is that the disciples were being obedient to Jesus:

“Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was

there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.” (Mt 14:22-24)

but even though they were being obedient they were experiencing great difficulties. Even though the Sea of Galilee is only about 5 miles wide at this point the disciples were unable to fulfil Jesus’ instructions to cross to the other side despite having been rowing for many hours – the account in John’s gospel (6:19) tells us that they had been rowing three or four hours – because the wind against them was so strong and the waters were rough. Mark’s gospel (6:48) says “they were straining at the oars and making little progress”.

Although the Sea of Galilee is really a fresh water lake, it’s 680 feet below sea level, which makes it warm, and it’s surrounded by mountains shaped like funnels that allow cold air to mix with the warm air above the lake. This often causes very strong winds.

So, the first thing we can learn is that even though we may be completely obedient to God’s commands we will not necessarily be spared from troubles and the storms of life. I believe the reason is that it is only in the midst of these storms that we develop our faith and the wisdom to really apply God’s word in our lives.

The English artist Joseph Turner once invited the preacher and novelist Charles Kingsley to his studio to see a picture he had just completed depicting a storm at sea. Filled with admiration Kingsley asked “how did you make it so realistic?” Turner replied “when I decided to paint this scene, I thought it would be best to go the coast of Holland and hire a fisherman to take me out in his boat during an actual storm. I

knew this was the only way I could get a feel for what I wanted to get on canvass. The fisherman tied me to the mast so I could watch in safety and I not only experienced the storm, but sensed its awesome power. The tempest blew itself into me until I seemed to become a part of it. When it was over, I was able to depict on canvass all the powerful fury I had felt at sea.”

At the beginning of the book of Job, we are told that he was a mature faithful follower of God before all his trials which the book recounts. But, by the time Job gets to chapter 42 he is able to say “My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you.” Job didn’t really know God until he had weathered the storms of life – and neither do we. I don’t claim to have the answers to the huge problem of pain and suffering, but I do believe that the fact that problems and difficulties are a learning and growing experience is part of the reason why God allows them.

It’s also worth noting that the disciples experience this storm just after they witnessed the wonderful miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. Often storms come in our lives just after a time of blessing.

Nevertheless, even in the midst of our problems, Jesus promises to be with us, just as he was with the disciples – look at verse 25:

“During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.” (Mt 14:25)

As the account in Mark’s gospel (6: 47-48) tells us, Jesus had seen their plight and recognised that they were in trouble.

But, we often don't recognise Jesus when he comes to us in our troubles, we're not aware of the one who can save us.

Certainly the disciples weren't – look at verse 26:

“When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.” (Mt 14:26)

Jesus immediately tried to reassure them – look at verse 27:

“But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.”” (Mt 14:27)

Then Peter says a surprising thing – verse 28:

“"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water.”” (Mt 14:28)

Jesus doesn't try and dissuade him or give him detailed instructions, he just says “come”. In fact, the Greek word translated ‘come’ is quite a powerful word impelling Peter to come – perhaps ‘come on’ might be a better translation. Jesus wants us all to come to him.

Notice that Peter didn't make a move until he received the word from Jesus. It's not faith to step out into the unknown when you haven't received a clear word from God to step out – it's foolishness. However, Peter now had to take a huge step of faith – he had to get out of the boat in the middle of a storm and walk on water.

A few years ago John Ortberg wrote quite a well known book entitled ‘if you want to walk on water, Get out of the boat’.

There is a truth there, if Peter had stayed in the boat he would never have had his water walking experience. But, as I just said we need to make sure that we really have received a call to get out of the boat and that this call is from Jesus. We can't walk on water in our own strength – we will drown. Equally,

when we do get our call we need to step out of the boat. Many people are called by God, but they refuse to step out in faith. They are too afraid. The opposite of faith is fear. This is a fine balance and we need to attune our spiritual senses and stay close to God so that we can recognise a call when it comes. Note also that Peter was called to do something impossible to him – walk on water. When God calls us it may well be to something that is impossible to us in our own strength. When we are sure we have the call we need to have faith, to believe and trust in him. God isn't asking us to do what we can, he is asking us to trust in Him to do through us what we can't.

Initially Peter's step of faith was a success – see verse 29: ““Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus.” (Mt 14:29) But then Peter moved his focus from Jesus to the storm – verse 30:

“But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"” (Mt 14:30)

There's a lesson for us all there. When faced with a problem, particularly one which arises whilst we're taking a step of faith we must keep our eyes and our focus on the solution and the salvation – Jesus – and not focus on the problem. As soon as Peter moved his focus to the storm he began to sink. It's not life's storms which make us fail, it's how we respond to them. We need to keep our focus – our eyes, our minds, our thoughts and our actions – on Jesus and not on the problem. We cannot overcome the problems in our own strength anymore than Peter could walk on water in his own strength.

In our reading Peter was saved from his failure by Jesus – verse 31:

“Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”” (Mt 14:31)

and then Jesus performs a further miracle – he calms the storm – verse 32:

“And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.” (Mt 14:32)

The account in Mark's gospel makes it clear that the disciples had not really understood the importance of the earlier miracle of feeding the 5,000, but now, overwhelmed by that plus the three miracles of (i) Jesus walking on water, (ii) Peter walking on water and (iii) Jesus calming the storm, the disciples acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God for the first time – see verse 33:

“Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”” (Mt 14:33)

Indeed the account in John's gospel indicates that there was even a fourth miracle as John says that once Jesus got into the boat it immediately arrived at the far shore of the lake.

This was the first time that the disciples as a group had ever addressed Jesus as the Son of God. Indeed, only two human beings had done so previously – John the Baptist and Nathanael (although Nathanael could not have appreciated the full significance of what he was saying as he did not become one of the 12). All other earlier acknowledgements were made by Angels or demons. The text also says that the disciples ‘worshipped’ Jesus. Here quite a strong word meaning ‘prostrated themselves’ is used for worship and we

have to remember that Jews were only permitted to worship the one God.

So let's just quickly summarise what we've learnt today. Firstly, we see that God does not keep us out of the storms of life. Rather he often allows us – or even commands us as with the disciples here – to go through them as part of a testing, teaching and learning process. Secondly, we see that the timing of these storms is often that they come after we have received a special blessing. Thirdly, we are not in control of the storms. Not of the timing, the intensity or the duration of them or indeed anything about them. As long as we remain strong and do not give up, we are getting stronger in the storm. We want storms to end quickly, but their duration is the very thing that strengthens us as we endure them. Fourthly, we must have faith. Peter had to have the faith to leave the relative security of the boat and step out onto the rough waters. But our faith must be in Jesus not in ourselves as the 'self help' books would have us believe. Fifthly, Jesus is on the water in the midst of the storm ready to be our saviour and our salvation. If we want to get to him, we must listen for his call and then have the faith and courage to act. It is often in the storms of our lives that we find the deepest intimacy with God. But, when Jesus comes towards us in the dark, we need to stay focussed on him if we are to make it.

Let's close with a few words of prayer. Father, in the storms of life give us the faith to rely implicitly on our saviour and salvation, your Son Jesus Christ. Help us to recognise him in the dark times and places of our lives and give us the spiritual discernment to hear his call and the courage to respond to it. Enable us to stay focussed on Jesus as we respond so that we

may walk on the rough seas generated by our storms without sinking. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.