

Trinity 9 Peter walks on water: confidence in Christ (P14)

Strangely, today's gospel reading is the same as the gospel we had at the Tuesday Communion this week. For those who were present on Tuesday this will be Peter and Jesus part 2!

One of the intriguing things about this story of Jesus and Peter walking on water is whether it is more about faith on the one hand or challenges to faith or doubt on the other. In order to capture this tension, I am entitling these thoughts, 'Confidence in Christ', and am posing the gentle question, how confident are we, or do we feel, in a Peter sort of way, in the inspiration and object of our faith, Jesus, Our Lord and friend and brother? Paul says in Romans 10 v.9, "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved!" And he goes on to say, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." As people who call upon the name of the Lord frequently, and with joy and abandon, these words from Romans encourage us to be quietly confident in the faith we hold. And in 1 Corinthians 12 v.3, Paul says that "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." To call upon the name of the Lord in prayer and worship is something that changes us through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The saying of the Lord's Prayer, as we have been doing recently, or the repetition of the Jesus Prayer, more familiar in eastern Christianity, are ways in which we will find that as we call on the name, something transformational begins to happen. The transformation may be very gentle and subtle, and may take time, and may act within us almost unconsciously, but we will find it to be for our healing and wholeness i.e. for our salvation.

It is very interesting, therefore, to see that in the middle of this episode on the lake Peter cries out, "Lord save me!" And we might ask, is this a cry of faith rising up in within him, or is it about faith ebbing away? It looks at

first like the latter. Either way, the issue of the capacity of Christ to save is at the heart of the encounter. This we might say is obvious, and it is! But if we ask about Peter's confidence in Christ, which at his point is indeed in doubt, it is very interesting to note that this episode on the lake follows directly after the feeding of 5000 on the mountainside. What's intriguing is that straight after a momentous occasion of Jesus feeding a crowd so large from an offering of loaves and fishes so small, which the disciples take part in and witness, when we would expect the disciples' faith to be bubbling over with enthusiasm, once on the lake in a bit of a storm, the old doubts creep quickly in. Hasn't Peter remembered that Jesus has just saved 5000 people, and yet he cries out in distress and fear, "Lord, save me!" But we do!... The truth about faith is that frequently we cry out; when things go wrong, or we can't fathom what's happening in us or around us, we cry out, "Lord, save me!"

What is even more striking, is that this little passage has a chiasmic structure. In case you have forgotten, that means a symmetrical structure. Either side of the cry, "Lord, save me!" are two very different, but possibly complementary, messages from Jesus. When the disciples first see Jesus coming to them on the water, "immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid'."... "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." On the other hand, after Peter's 'crie de Coeur', Jesus says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"... And so we have two alternative ways of interpreting every crisis of faith, or every assessment of faith, or every challenge to faith. When like Peter we wobble, are we more inclined to hear the words, 'you of little faith, why do you doubt', and if we do, what effect does that have on us or in us; or are we more likely to hear the words of Jesus say, 'take heart it is I do not be afraid'? If we step back, then, and see this moment of crisis for Peter on the lake, when he calls out, Lord save me, and we register these two responses of Jesus, to the disciples' fear and to Peter's fear, do we not hear echoes of just the sort of dilemmas of faith that we face all the time. For when we are challenged

in our faith, and our confidence drops or wobbles, are we not inclined to feel on the one hand a bit dispirited and inadequate, that what we begin to sense as a lack of faith or dwindling of faith is cause for self-reproach? And we say as though to ourselves, 'you of little faith, why do you doubt?' Or, on the other hand, do we also hear the voice of Jesus say, 'come unto me and rest'; or, 'take heart it is I; do not be afraid.' At these latter times we are somehow ready to lay our burden down and trust? And perhaps the point is that human nature being what it is, are we not actually rather too often prone to take the former route, because we have been schooled, or many of us have, in believing the worst about ourselves. And the other side of this is that we have perhaps failed to grasp fully the true meaning of grace? So we are less well attuned to hear the comfortable words our saviour says unto all that truly turn to him (as the old prayer book says), 'Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you', or the words of Jesus on the lake, 'Take heart it is I; do not be afraid'.

The beauty of this little story, as it dramatises the different responses of faith, is that it encourages us to hear at depth the reassuring, persuasive voice of Jesus, and so to find in him a resting place, a place in which we are remade and refashioned according to his words and his ways. We need to take to heart the words of the writer to the Hebrews in chapter 4 verse 15, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are.... let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace in time of need."

One of the delightful things about this story is that it has bequeathed to us one of our everyday expressions, 'to walk on water'. To walk on water is to perform with outstanding skill, ease and authority in some activity or accomplishment. With the World Athletics Championships on at the moment, we are perhaps reminded that there are two people who have

been walking on water these past few years, almost unrivalled, one is Mo Farah and the other Usain Bolt. Mo Farah has just got silver in the 5000m after winning gold in the 10000m. He was apparently disappointed at the end of the second race. So perhaps, although he remains a champion and a hero, he is no longer walking on water. For Usain Bolt things are quite similar, if a little starker. Last week he came third place, to two American sprinters in the 100m and yesterday he had to retire from the 4x100m relay. And perhaps for the first time we have seen the humanity of the man – or at least his humanity in the sense that he could be beaten. Walking on water can't last for ever! It is probably unwise to compare Usain Bolt to Peter the apostle, but I am going to, just for a moment! Because in the same way that we see Peter lose confidence and begin to sink, did we, I wonder, see Usain Bolt on the blocks looking to his opponents with just a touch of anxiety rather than defiance?... rather than keeping his eyes fixed on the finishing line? Were the doubts creeping in we may wonder? Or after his performance in the heats, was he already beginning to experience another side of himself, less confident and less sure? I don't know. But what I think is true for anyone who walks on water, as demonstrated by Peter, is this fact that it doesn't last for ever! And in the drama of faith this is really important. For the journey of faith is not about accomplishment. It's not about achieving goals or personal bests, even though it has indeed been compared to running in a race (Hebrews 12). This is because faith is neither about reaching a standard nor about being a star. Rather, it's about walking in the way of Christ – walking the Emmaus road and hearing all about him, taking up the cross and following in the way of suffering love, learning from him, resting in him and being reborn and remade, having our humanity renewed and refreshed.

And on this way of journeying with Christ, when the going gets tricky or we face trials and diversions, and despondency sets in, owing to the storms of life, we are to remember that when Peter was sinking Jesus

didn't watch indifferently, or set him another task to perform, but he "immediately reached out his hand and caught him". Jesus is not a rival or an opponent, but a friend, one who laid down his life for his friends. He is alongside us and on the journey with us.

We may like to think we can walk on water. And the way our present culture puts performance on a pedestal, we might be forgiven for thinking it's a worthy thing to do. What the story of Peter and Jesus and the disciples on the lake tells us, I think, is that actually the journey of faith is about a relationship not a performance. It's a relationship with Christ in which sometimes we will be confronted with the words, "you of little faith why did you doubt?" But much more of the time we are invited to hear those other words of Jesus, saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Our challenge is to learn how to live more truly out of this conviction, through his grace, confident in our faith in Him.

1791 Words
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August 13th 2017