



**I Kings 19.9-12**  
**Matthew 14.22-33**  
**9<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

**Smiling at the Storm?**

**ALL AGE TALK: Smiling at the Storm?**

During these summer months perhaps we dream of sitting on the beach looking out over the sparkling sea. Or maybe we've managed to get away and actually spend time on a boat.

Lakes, rivers and seas may seem idyllic to us but in bible times they were viewed as places of terror, even death. As one bible commentator I read recently puts it: *Israel didn't have a surf culture!*

The Psalms talk of the *swirling rivers*, and the last book of the Bible, Revelation, describes Paradise as a place where the sea will be no more. For all us 'coast' lovers that's a bit disappointing!

However, I do recall an afternoon on a boat that shook me up a bit. We were brand new parents grabbing a late season, last minute holiday in Torquay. During the week we went on one of the final trips across the bay to Brixham. We boarded with the pushchair not knowing if this was really sensible. As the swell got up we were horrified to see that the teenager driving the boat (excuse my landlubber speak) did so reclining on his seat with a mug of coffee in one hand, steering the boat with his feet whilst reading the paper! But we survived!

Lake Galilee, which will feature in Sunday's gospel, was famous for its unexpected storms. Even seasoned fishermen got caught out. Matthew has two stories which are connected: Jesus stilling the storm when he was in the boat, and later, as he walked on the water, rescuing Peter as he began to sink.

It might feel to us, at the moment, as if we've all been through (and are still experiencing) a collective 'storm'. These have been worrying and anxious months and the waters have been choppy.

So, it will be good to look at the story once again of Jesus out on Lake Galilee, of the disciples in the boat and Peter sinking – and as we so we'll ask the question: based on a chorus I used to sing in Sunday School: With Christ in the vessel – can I, can you, can we, really smile at the storm...?

Minister: For the Word of God is scripture  
**All: For the Word of God among us**  
Minister: For the Word of God within us  
**All: Thanks be to God. Amen**

Things are moving fast in Matthew 14. Yet, even as the momentum builds and the crowds get bigger, Jesus goes on retreat.

He heads to the hills. Mountains and high places are symbolic in scripture. It was on a mountain that Moses receives the Commandments, Elijah hears a still small voice and Jesus is transfigured. God seems to speak on mountaintops and his words resonated in high places; so put a collection of Jesus' teaching together and give it a divine imprimatur by calling it *The Sermon on The Mount*.

Jesus heads to the hills to pray and listen out for the voice of God. At the same time, he urges his disciples to sail to the far shore of Galilee, to Gennesaret.

What could possibly go wrong; Jesus at prayer on a mountain and fishermen disciples sailing on the lake?

Nature has a habit of raining on our parades and disrupting our plans.

A storm blows up that frightens even seasoned fishermen. So, shortly before dawn, probably between 3-6am, Jesus, as the story goes, comes to their aid, walking on water, drawing alongside the boat.

At first, they thought they were seeing a ghost. By the end of the story they were calling him Lord.

Maybe we get the focus of today's gospel wrong. It's often called the

story of Peter Walking on the Water, or Peter Sinking into the Waves. Yet, it's Jesus who should really have first billing. It's all too easy to take the spotlight off of Jesus and put it on Peter instead.

The narrative doesn't make the same mistake. It seems to say to us, and it's a rhetorical question: when you're in a storm do you look to Peter for help, or do you put your trust in Jesus?

It's still a live question because even today, perhaps, especially today, because of the cult of easy and vacuous celebrity, we can all depend too much on a 'charismatic' leader rather than trust in a wise and loving God.

Of course we thank God for good leaders; be they in civic, church or family life. We long for women and men of compassion, insight and goodwill to be faithful signposts for us and role models for our children.

But we are setting both them and ourselves up for a fall if we don't recognise that even the bravest, noblest and wisest amongst us have feet of clay, and just like Peter, we too can sink.

The disciples left in the boat that stormy dawn, to whom could they turn and trust that morning? Peter, now sinking, or Jesus, still walking towards them?

We are grateful to pastors and teachers, youth leaders and fellow pilgrims who have shared this pilgrimage with us and maybe, at times, we have kept going for a short while because of their encouragement. But, in the long term they can only be a signpost for us, pointing us beyond themselves, to God – for it is in God's love and wisdom that we'll find our lasting strength and ultimate inspiration.

Everything else and, indeed, everyone else, can, in time, sink below the waves.

So, why might Matthew have put not one, but two stories in his gospel about a storm on Galilee?

Many believe that towards the end of the first century, when these words

were written, it had become common place to think of the Church as a boat.

Even today, you might see a boat in a church logo design, especially in ecumenical ones like The World Council of Churches.

But, Matthew's boat isn't having an easy journey across the lake but is stuck in the eye of a storm and battered on every side. People in this boat have risked a great deal to become one of its passengers.

And that was true in those decades after Jesus. The Early Church knew tough days. It was often misunderstood and frequently persecuted. It was a stormy beginning.

Yet the message of Matthew 14 is: we will get to the other side, we'll make it and we won't sink because Jesus has come alongside, we are not alone, God shares the journey with us.

Once landed at Gennesaret on the far shore, we are told the mission of Jesus continued. Crowds gathered, Jesus taught and works of compassion and kindness were shared. In one sense it was the same mission as when they were on the northern shore of Bethsaida feeding 5000. Yet now, having travelled west across the top part of the lake, in Gennesaret maybe we encounter changed disciples. They have matured because they have weathered the storm. In this new phase of their time with Jesus they are better equipped to serve because it was actually as they waves crashed down on the boat that many of them began to see him differently and believe in him more calling him the Son of God.

Going through a storm, surviving it and coming out the other side can change us all.

The Revd Chad Varah, when he retired from St Stephen's by The Mansion House in London in 2003 at the age of 93 went down in the history books as the oldest serving Anglican Priest in the country. Yet, that isn't probably what he's remembered for.

His legacy is the organisation we know as The Samaritans. Chad Varah, as

a young curate, taking his first funeral in 1935, was burying a young girl who had committed suicide. He said later in life, that her pain and her story changed his life for ever.

He battled the wind and waves of internal storm that stayed in life after that first funeral until 1953 when he put an advert in the Daily Herald on 7<sup>th</sup> December saying that if anyone reading it felt suicidal, ring Mansion House 9000, his church's vestry phone, and they would find a friend, a listener on the other end of the line.

The storm in his life changed him, it didn't overwhelm him, and although it took almost 20 years, he came through to the other side determined to share in the task of making our world a more caring and loving place to be.

When we get through the other side of the Virus Pandemic, what, I wonder will be different about us and our faith. Pray God, we'll emerge onto the other shore even more committed to both the person of Christ and the concept of community.

May it be so in the name of the one, who even now, is sharing the journey with us across the lake. Amen

*Ian Green Amersham: 27<sup>th</sup> July 2020*