

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 9th August 2020 – 9th Sunday after Trinity

1Kings 19.9-18; Romans 10.5-15; Matthew 14.22-33

Was Peter, in our Gospel reading today, foolish or faithful, when he stepped out of the boat? Answers on a postcard please.

Peter was probably both of these things, both foolish and also faithful. He was certainly foolish in the eyes of the world. A seasoned fisherman well aware of the dangers of the sea, Peter would normally have laughed derisively at the idea that anyone could walk on water. On the other hand he was in awe of Jesus. He had witnessed many things that he had previously thought impossible. He had realised that God was at work in Jesus in a very remarkable way, and so, in faith, he stepped out.

He stepped out, as it were, of his comfort zone, as countless Christians throughout the ages have done, as a result of their faith in Jesus. And every single one of us who has ever done this thing, stepping out of our comfort zone in order to be faithful to Jesus, has wondered if we are honest with ourselves, whether we are being foolish or faithful. Every priest and every ordinand has certainly experienced this. It is about the raw experience of being faithful to Jesus, as individual Christians and as churches.

One wonders just how long Peter actually managed to walk on the water before he lost faith that he could do it. One is reminded of that frequent cartoon device that elongates the moment of panicked realisation of impending disaster. When the car that has driven off the cliff, hangs in the air, waiting until the driver has fully realised their folly, before plunging downwards.

Peter was always going to start sinking, and the real point of this sign, the sign of walking on water, is that at every stage it is about faith and trust in Jesus. When God calls us as he often does, to leave our comfort zones, he is not promising that nothing will ever be difficult or challenging. The point is that he does not leave us to fall. This is the faith that is sure. We will be storm-tossed. We will face heartache. We will be tested. But God does not let fall those who have stepped out of their comfort zone to serve him. He does not fail. We shall not fall.

One of the effects of the Coronavirus crisis, is that it has both cruelly exposed many of the weaknesses that were already there in the fabric of our communities, and has vastly accelerated many changes that were already happening anyway. The overall effect is both deeply confusing and strangely hopeful, strangely exhilarating. There are many casualties, some of them very serious indeed, but also there is palpably a renewed determination to make things better than they were, in all sorts of ways. There is real hope in this. The one thing that won't work at all is just clinging to the past, and the winners are those who are able to adapt quickest.

ST MARY-LE-TOWER CHURCH IPSWICH

The Church is not immune from all this, and the effects of the pandemic on the Church is being profound. There has necessarily been a huge growth in on-line activity and this is almost certainly here to stay. But it is too early to say what roles churches will play in building communities and addressing loneliness and serving those in need in the years ahead. What we do know is that things will remain different and that new life will accompany those who work with change, rather than resist it tooth and nail.

St Mary-le-Tower is very much part of this. What part can we play in the renewal of Ipswich town centre following the pandemic? How can we help to build community, help to support the voluntary sector, and overcome loneliness. Where is God calling us to step out in faith and find new life? How can we sustain our own life and choral ministry?

Of one thing I am sure, it will not be by retreating into ourselves, by becoming more inward looking, despite the very real temptation to do just that when things are tough. Rather the call is to step out in faith, and to step out of our familiar comfort zones, and seek out the new life of God's kingdom.

When Peter did this, two things were paramount. Firstly, he made sure that this is what Jesus really wanted him to do. "If it is really you, command me to come to you." In the new world that surrounds us, absolutely our first priority is to keep our eyes on Jesus, and to pay attention to how God is calling us. Christians are not simply called to be foolish, but to be ready to step out in faith, and in obedience. Secondly, when we notice the strong winds and rough seas, this is not the time to doubt. But rather to redouble our faith and trust in Jesus. For God's hand is strong to save.

The life of faith is not just about setting out; in many ways that's the easy bit. The life of faith is about sustaining that faith, and discovering that God remains faithful. You can't do it by not stepping out. You can't do it by turning back. You can only discover the faithfulness of God by remaining faithful to Jesus when the going gets rough. The sign of walking on water is a sign about faithfulness, both ours and God's, however foolish we might be. Amen.

CJ. 09.08.20