

CORE TASK – NURTURE
MATTHEW 14:22-36

Growing – there are all kinds of pictures! We have been growing tomatoes, peppers, courgettes, and a cucumber in our greenhouse this summer; they have been very carefully looked after, watered when needed, fed, trained up strings to hold the plants up and have them grow in the right direction and then we've enjoyed the fruit of our labours. Also we're watching our grandson grow up: over the last few months we've seen him learn to crawl and walk; we've seen him begin to understand exactly what you say to him and learn all kinds of things that he commits to memory, and then try to speak and communicate with the outside world. His growing up happens, it seems by accident, but really his growth and development is the result of all kinds of influences on him, his parents, nursery, other children, and hopefully also his grandparents! That continues beyond someone who is 16 months old; we continue to grow and develop all through life – we grow older, we understand new things, there are new experiences in life; we keep growing in some way or another till day we die!

Growth might seem to happen by accident, but in fact every kind of growth needs some kind of nurture. The plants in our greenhouse will die if they are not watered and fed, or will grow in all kinds of wrong directions if they are not trained. So they need nurtured and looked after. A child will grow older by the nature of things, it would seem, but when you neglect a child – we've all seen on television what happens when a child is neglected; these are extreme cases, but a child's development physically, socially, emotionally, spiritually and intellectually will be so much better with the right kind of care and nurture. So while it might seem as if things grow anyway, they grow much better if they are tended, cared for and nurtured.

How does faith grow? Can we apply anything that we learn from our greenhouse or our grandson to Christian faith and to the life of the Church? 10 years ago, we identified 5 Core Tasks of the Church here in Juniper Green: worship, nurture, prayer, mission, service; and last week we began a little series of sermons on these 5 Core Tasks as a way of reminding ourselves what these are and considering again what they mean. We looked at worship last week and the sermon is on the website in print or the audio copy is on CD in the library. Today, we consider nurture – what does nurture mean? What are we trying to nurture? Nurture is a word that brings together all that we've done in our greenhouse with our plants; nurture is word that pulls together what parents and others do in bringing up a child. Nurture is about nourishing something, feeding, encouraging something.

We are a Church which nurtures faith. How does faith grow? There is a simple answer – faith grows as it is nurtured! Faith doesn't grow by accident; if it is neglected it will not grow and may even wither. Mattie became a member of the Church and she attended well for a time, but then circumstances meant that she gave up; 5 years later she complained to her friend that her faith was no different now from 5 years before, to which her friend, very perceptively pointed out that she had done nothing to nurture her faith, so it was no surprise. As adults are we living with the faith we had in Sunday School? We know some simple Bible stories, but have never engaged with them in an adult way? Perhaps we've never engaged with Jesus in adult way. Is our faith the same as it was 5, 10, 20 years ago? Nurturing faith is a choice to make; we can neglect our faith and it will stay the same; we can take the opportunities for nurture and faith will grow, will develop, will be challenged and made stronger.

We read the story of Jesus walking on the water in Matthew 14; it is a story that shows the extraordinary power of Jesus, to walk on the water to His disciples as they struggled against the storm on the lake, in the boat. But I want to look at the story from the point of view of the disciples as a learning experience and ask 'What difference would that experience have made to them?' They learned some things from the experience, but what? How would they have learned? By this point in their relationship with Jesus, they had been with Him for a while and they had heard Him teach and seen Him heal and help people in need. They had also been sent out on mission and had learned a lot about themselves by that. They had just witnessed Jesus feeding 5000 people with five loaves and two fish and had been amazed at seeing what Jesus did with that crowd. Jesus had sent them away, to cross the lake in the boat on their own while He sent the crowd home and spent time on His own praying!

It is dark! It is 3am! It is stormy! It is windy and the waves are kicking up over the side of the boat; you wish the sides of the boat are higher! Some of them are used to this; they are fishermen who had made their living from these waters, but the tax collector and others are perhaps feeling a bit sick! They are struggling to make any headway against the wind and Jesus has been watching them from the hillside, praying for them perhaps. But then, they see a figure coming towards them out of darkness. Twice Matthew, the tax collector, makes it plain what is happening: "*During...*" (14:25f) 'Walking on the lake' – some have tried to suggest that Jesus was walking at the side of the lake or in the shallows and the disciples are closer to the shore than they knew, but that is not what Matthew wants us to think! Jesus comes to them walking on the water.

Their first reaction? "*It's...*" (14:26) Real people don't emerge out of the darkness in the middle of the water at 3am. They are terrified. What Jesus has done only adds to their fear at first. But then He speaks: "*Take courage...*" (14:27) We are the twelve in the boat; let's put ourselves there. There are two things we learn: first of all, the fact - Jesus is there! Jesus is on the water with us, beside us; He is there with us. Secondly, we listen to Him! What's He saying? "*Take...*" Where Jesus is, there is no need to be afraid! These are two powerful lessons for us, for the twelve! Jesus is with us even in the midst of a storm, even in midst of the lake; He is with us on the stormy waters of the lake; when we are terrified and things are not going well for us, He is there. Where Jesus is, there is no need to be afraid; we can put ourselves in His hands because He can help us; later He stills the storm so that our trust is vindicated. The experience of that night taught them all such a powerful lesson about Jesus, so much so that they remembered the event and told the story over and over again and Matthew was there and later he wrote it down, and included it in his account of Jesus. Reading their story we too can learn these lessons.

But there's more, because Peter went a step further. "*Lord...*" (14:28f) Peter, are you mad? Get back in the boat! You'll drown! It's far too dangerous! None of the other eleven did what Peter chose to do; they all stayed safely in the boat; their fear was still far too strong! Yet, for a moment, Peter walked on water. Peter had the experience of a lifetime that none of the others had and that he would never forget. For a moment, he walked on water! Then, his fears took hold of him again, he saw the wind and the waves and began to panic and began to sink till Jesus rescued him before he drowned. There are two words we might use to describe Peter's experience: risk and fail. *Risk*: certainly he did take a risk, getting out of the boat in the storm; it would be much safer in the boat; but Peter learned a lesson outside the boat that he would never have learned inside – how glorious a thing it is to walk on water with Jesus! *Fail*: did Peter fail? I'm not sure that he

did, but even if you think that he failed, he learned an enormous amount. "Because Peter put himself in a position to *fail*, he also put himself in a position to *grow*. Failure is an indispensable, irreplaceable part of learning and growth... failure does not shape you; the way you *respond* to failure shapes you." (John Ortberg; *If you want to walk on water you've got to get out of the boat*)

How did Peter grow? What did he learn? What was nurtured in Peter that night?

- His relationship with Jesus grew stronger – Jesus said "Come" and Peter walked on water with Jesus for a few moments; Jesus saved him when he began to drown and that trust-relationship between Peter and Jesus would be different from before; his experience shaped a stronger trust in Jesus.
- His understanding of Jesus grew: he saw Jesus in a new light, as someone who can do the most remarkable things, like walk on water!
- His understanding of himself was stronger: "with risk and trusting Jesus, I can do great things; I can walk on water; I did achieve it, even if only for a moment; perhaps I failed this time, but next time when things are tough I can take the risk and know that Jesus will not let me down."

So when he became a leader of the Church, he remembered what it felt like to get out of the boat, to take a risk and what it felt like to walk on the water with Jesus. What he learned that night, along with all his other experiences of Jesus, shaped the kind of leader Peter became.

What are you doing to nurture your faith, to nurture your relationship with Jesus? There are three key resources:

- Bible reading – if you've not tried it before, why not try it? Or come to the Bible study group to learn alongside others? Why not try it? Are you frightened to show your ignorance? Is it too risky? Yet, there is so much here to stretch, develop and nurture faith so that our relationship with Jesus is stronger, deeper and better. The statistic that gives me most cause for concern for the future of the Church in Scotland is the one that says only 1 in 10 Christians read their Bible regularly. How then is faith nurtured?
- Prayer – the same is true for prayer; I'll talk more about that next week; prayer on own is hard enough, but with others – is it far too risky? Yet again there is so much to learn from one another and support to gain!
- Church – church is not really a spectator sport, but there are all kinds of ways of being involved in Church life beyond Sunday morning. Is it too risky to take on a job, or some kind of responsibility? We want to stay safe! Or if you take a risk; you will, like all of us, fail at times. But how do we respond to failure? Give up and hide? Or learn from failure and be determined to be stronger the next time?

We have a choice to make. Will we choose to nurture our faith, deliberately and full of purpose, or not? That is the choice. We might put it off till another time, but when? Faith does not grow automatically; faith will grow when it is nurtured. We nurture faith by reading the Bible and learning from it; we nurture faith by prayer and trusting our life and times to Jesus; we nurture faith by taking an active part in the worship and the life of the Church. Is all of that too risky? You worry that you might give time to something that you might not like? "I might feel out of my depth?" "it might take me outside my comfort zone?" If you put yourself in a position to fail, you will also put yourself in a position to grow! Choose to do what it takes to nurture your faith, to grow in your trust-relationship with Jesus, to learn from Him. It is well worth it in the end!