

MATTHEW 14:22-33  
FAITH – SPELLED “R-I-S-K”

Here's a way to help us understand Bible stories - imagine yourself in the story! Some stories don't lend themselves to this, but many of them do. Imagine yourself right in the middle of the story you're reading. What are you seeing, hearing, smelling? What are your senses taking in of what's going on around about you? There's something going on in the story - what is it? What part are you playing in that story? Imagine yourself as the main character - what are you being asked to do? Or one of the other characters in the story: what's going on about you? How are you involved? Then how does it feel? What are emotions you experiencing? Fear? Amazement? How are you reacting to what's going on around about you? All of this is a way of trying to help us understand the Bible, what's going on in the world of the Bible and how these stories affect our faith. Do they strengthen our faith, or challenge what we believe. It is an attempt to leave us with a deeper appreciation of the Bible and a stronger sense of God being involved in the world we live in.

Imagine your way into the story of the disciples in the boat! First of all, it's dark and there are no lights, so you can't see very much at all, unless the moon is out. But it's stormy so maybe the clouds are covering the moon. You can hear the sound of the sea, of the water lapping against the side of the boat as it moves gently through the water at first; you hear the sighing of the ropes as they move, holding up the sails. Nobody's speaking, because we're all still taking in the day's other events? As the night goes on, all of that gets louder and you can hear the sound of the wind as it begins to blow; a sudden storm is coming up; you can feel the water begin to come up over the sides of the boat; you're getting wet! What are you feeling? Well, the boat is moving up and down more decidedly than before, pitching and rolling as the storm gets more intense. Some of your friends are good sailors and are used to this and are not worried, but others are landlubbers and are feeling sea-sick. What about you? Maybe you're beginning to feel just a touch afraid by the intensity of the storm, wondering what's going to happen next.

Then, out of the darkness and the storm, you see a figure walking towards you. You can't believe your eyes at first because you've not seen anything like this before. The boat is not really near the shore so it can't be anything other than someone walking on the water. All you can think of, it is a ghost! But then He speaks; you realise that it is Jesus. The next thing you know there is Peter and he's getting out of the boat; it's stormy, the water is rough and through the noise of the wind you can hear Peter talk to Jesus, but you can't quite make out what they say. Peter gets on fine to start with, but then begins to sink and cries out to Jesus, something in the midst of the storm. Jesus reaches out and grabs hold of him and they both climb into the boat. The storm goes down and we're all mightily relieved. Next stop, the shore! Please! Frightening! Amazing! What just happened?

You've just been an eye-witness to one of the great events of Jesus' ministry, but only twelve people saw it happen; it was dark! The story that is told to do two things: first of all, to enhance Jesus' Name; and secondly, to strengthen our faith. There are people who will try to explain it away, to find another explanation for this, but there is no need. Jesus is able to do this and it shows how great Jesus is, both to walk on water and to care for His friends. It is because He cared for His friends in their need that He did this dramatic thing in the first place. Because Jesus is able to do this, we see again His power and His love and so our faith is stronger; here is Jesus, someone to trust, someone who cares, someone who is able to help us in our time of need, who says to His friends *"Take courage..." (Matthew 14:27)*

**1. Tough times come to those who follow Jesus** There are people around who will tell you that we face tough times because we've disobeyed the Lord and that tough times are God's way of bringing us back to Him, almost as a punishment. Well, here's a different way of looking. The disciples got into this tough time because they followed Jesus, because they did what Jesus told them to do. "*Immediately...*" (*Matthew 14:22*) 'Compelled' is the word. Jesus compelled His disciples to get into the boat. The storm, their fear, and the rest, were not a punishment for wrong-doing; they were part and parcel of life, part of a life lived following Jesus. They hadn't got it wrong and God wasn't punishing them; they were doing exactly what Jesus wanted them to do and the storm was part of that life. John's version tells us that crowd wanted to make Jesus king by force; perhaps Jesus wanted His disciples out of the way of that; was there a threat of violence in the air? For whatever reason, Jesus sent them away and as they went, life got a whole lot tougher.

Then there's the "why?" question: Travis are a Glasgow band of the 1990's and still going; perhaps their most famous song was blasted out at Hampden Park last week as it got wetter and wetter. "*Why does it always rain on me?*" You have a picture of someone going round with their own permanent cloud and rain-shower and everyone else is dry and sunny. Here's the next line: "Is it because I lied when I was 17?" Rain is a punishment for our sins and faults, God is getting His own back! An enormous number of people believe that! But if that is your picture of God, it is not the God of the Bible that you believe in; it is not the God and father of the Lord Jesus that you believe in; Jesus went to great pains to dispel that idea. Tough times happen in life; it is quite a simple philosophy of life; bad things happen; they are part of life; there is no rhyme or reason to them; when we ask "why?" we get no answer. I can't tell you why; no-one can. Anyone who offers you an answer to the "why?" question, treat it with great caution. Tough times come along; they touch everybody; they come when we do what Jesus wants; they come when we don't.

**2. Jesus is with us when times are tough** Here's the power of this story. The disciples are struggling with the storm, and are not getting on well at all; they are frightened by it. Jesus is praying on the hillside; it takes no great leap of imagination to think that He is praying for them. He sees them struggle and He comes to help them! OK, walking on water is a bit extreme, perhaps; this causes more trouble at the start. But listen to Jesus' words: "*Take courage...*" (*Matthew 14:27*) "I'm here!" A parent to crying their child in the middle of the night – what's the first thing you say to them? "I'm here!" For them, Jesus' presence meant an end to their tough time because at the end of the story the storm went away and they managed to get safely to the other side of the lake. But even before that, surely the sense of Jesus with them must have brought them some kind of reassurance to calm their fears. Imagine being in that boat: it was not good place to be. Imagine Jesus appearing: you've already seen Him calm another storm and there must have been sense of relief and calm in your hearts.

Last week, we've been marking start of the First World War and there has been lots of material being read on TV and radio and in ceremonies the length and breadth of the country. That will continue for the next four years. One of the most powerful pieces I think I've come across is a poem written by Edward Shillito who was involved in the war and was the minister of an English free church. He wrote a poem afterwards called "Jesus of the scars" and it is the whole notion of that poem that I find hugely powerful. He pictures Jesus sharing the scars of people wounded by the war; Jesus' scars are the countersign to the fears people feel at the lowest moments of their lives, including the war. The poem ends: "But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak, and not a god has wounds but Thou alone." It conveys the most powerful sense that Jesus is with us when life is tough. "God has left me to suffer on

my own! Where is God when I need Him most? Heaven is shut to me; God is not listening to my prayers." There is a sense of anger in some people's hearts because they have that sense of abandonment by God. All that I can do is show you this Bible picture; this is what Jesus is really like; and encourage you to believe and hold onto notion that Jesus is with us.

**3. Faith is spelled R-I-S-K!** Peter walked on water. There's something to tell children! He would look back on it with mixed feelings. Yes, he did walk on water, but it nearly ended badly! "*Lord, if...*" (*Matthew 14:28f*) Peter got out of boat and walked on water. He took a risk! He took a huge risk! Did it pay off? Well, he walked on water and it was a quite unique experience! It was only when he took his eye off Jesus and began to look around him at the wind and the waves that he began to sink. Doubt is not lack of faith; doubt is faith in two minds and when Peter began to see the circumstances around him his faith began to waver and Jesus had to rescue him. But Peter walked on water!

It was Russell McLarty at a Kirk Session conference who first introduced us to the notion that faith is spelled R-I-S-K! Paul tells the Roman Christians: "*It is...*" (*Romans 10:10*) Faith takes the risk that these words are true and that God will do as He says. We learn to trust God's words and promises. Lots of people have taken that risk, have trusted God and God has not been found wanting; their trust has been justified and God has provided. Faith is a risk; we trust God to love us as He says He will; we trust God to keep that word. As individuals we take these risks in life and find that God is there before us and will provide for us everything we need: in our new circumstances, a new school this week, a new home, a new family, a new job - all of these involve elements of risk, because of elements we don't know; but God is there before us and will provide. Peter walked on water. Churches are faced with choices and decisions for the future; which way will we go? Sometimes being called to make choices involves an element of risk: will it work out? Will the change work? Taking risks doesn't come easy to the church, so we play safe and we don't make the change; it is too risky! Sometimes trusting God and being the people of God involves taking risks! But God knows and God is there before us and has promised to provide for His people. Peter walked on water!

I'm fascinated by this story. It is dark, we can see nothing! I'm not a great fan of boats and know I'd be the one feeling queasy and frightened. Maybe I'd even be saying "Where is Jesus when you need Him?" In the midst of the storm, just when I'm beginning to get angry with Jesus for not being there, He comes, walking on the water. Then, there is Peter walking on the water too! What fascinates me most is this whole notion of Jesus with His people in the storm! There are so many ways in which that picture touches people's lives, yours and mine. Jesus walks with us in the storms; Jesus' love sustains us in the storms; Jesus is able to help us in the storms. So many people in our world operate with the notion that the tough times are God's punishment for our sin; "I must have been bad to suffer like this!" Others are angry because God has abandoned them when they needed Him most. Others see God as sitting on a pink fluffy cloud, untouched by the world we live in. Yet, here is Jesus with His friends in the storm, helping them as they endure the storm, helping them out the other side of the storm. I can do no more than offer you this picture of Jesus as someone to trust, whatever life is like for you.