

TAKE COURAGE
MATTHEW 14:22-33

“Put yourself in the story!” One way of trying to understand Bible stories is to imagine yourself in the story, being there, taking part. It needs a bit of imagination, but is not that hard and it gives us a feel for the story, for what it must have been like to be there and see or hear what is going on. It is a way of helping us to make our faith stronger, helping us to believe Jesus. We’re going to try to do that today with this story of Jesus walking on water: What did it feel like from the disciples’ place? What did it feel like from Jesus’s place? By doing that, hopefully we can see what life is like for us and what faith in Jesus is like for us in our world. Our world feels a very different world from that of first century Palestine, but these stories are living stories; so let’s try to put ourselves inside this story.

We’ve told some of the story already. Jesus had just fed the crowd with bread and fish and the disciples had witnessed that, had even taken part in that. Now Jesus has stayed behind on the hillside to pray and the disciples are crossing the Sea of Galilee in a boat. The lake is notorious for sudden storms that come sweeping down the hillsides onto the water and perhaps one of these storms has hit their boat. They struggle. Jesus comes to them walking on the water and at first they think it is a ghost, but He calms them and reassures them. Then Peter: “*Lord, if...*” (*Matthew 14:28*) and he does well to begin with, but later he begins to sink and Jesus saves him and then saves the rest by calming the storm. Some have suggested alternative explanations to this story, mainly to take away the miracle from the story, but I see no need to do that; the story has a power all of its own.

Let’s try to put ourselves in the disciples’ shoes; see how it feels. We’ve just been involved in something extraordinary; Jesus has fed the huge crowd with only five loaves and two fishes; we were aware of the problem – the people were hungry, it’s late; we’ve got nothing to give them and not enough money to go to buy food – but Jesus solved the problem and not only that, we took part. We handed out the bread and the fish and then we collected in the leftovers, so there is no doubt in our minds about what happened. It was great; what a buzz there was in the crowd and how excited were we to be part of that. It has become a great high point of our time with Jesus; we will remember it forever.

Have you ever been caught in a storm at sea? Some of us are fishermen, lucky them: they’re used to storms at sea, but some of us aren’t! We’ve been terribly sick! When will this terrible storm end? It is going on forever! Wouldn’t you believe that these things always happen at night when can’t see what you’re doing and where you’re going – we could be anywhere! Where is Jesus when you need Him? He’s not here; He made us go off on our own and left us; we’re stuck here on our own and He’s nowhere to be seen. Wait a minute; there’s something coming through darkness; it’s a ghost! It looks terrifying; we’re even more afraid! It’s Jesus! He’s speaking: “*Take courage...*” (*Matthew 14:27*) How glad are we to see Him; He’s come to our rescue; just having Him here makes us all feel so much better. We’ll be OK now; He’ll sort out the storm and help us.

What’s Peter doing? Peter are you mad? He’s getting out of the boat. “*Lord, if...*” (*Matthew 14:28*) Is he trying to test Jesus? Is he trying to prove that it is Jesus? He’s getting out of the boat; “Peter don’t do it!” But actually, do you know, he’s doing it; he’s walking on the water, looking at Jesus. Oh, hold on; he looks afraid now; he seems to see the wind and the waves now; he’s stopped looking at Jesus and he’s starting to sink. If you are Peter you think: “it seemed the right thing to do, to take the risk, to go to Jesus. When I looked at him, His face encouraged me to try it and as long as I watched Him, I was fine; but I got distracted; Jesus saved me; it’s what He does!”

How many times have we been in situations not of our own making and have felt afraid, out of our depth? How many times have we struggled in the darkness, not knowing where we’re

going, not knowing how the story will end, feeling stuck? To make matters worse, it seems as if Jesus is not there; He has left us alone to suffer and struggle and hasn't come to help or save us. For many people, that was their experience of war, men stuck in the trenches, helpless, afraid and it seemed as if Jesus was not there, God had gone away and left them to struggle on. There are lots of more everyday situations in which that is how we feel. The challenge for us in that kind of situation is still to trust, to keep trusting Jesus to listen to our prayers, to answer us, to help us and to save us, even when it feels against the odds, or against the situation. Not every Bible story has a happy ending, but so often we are challenged to trust God and find His grace even in the darkness.

Can we put ourselves in Jesus' shoes? We might find that harder, but let's try. He's just done something extraordinary, feeding the crowd with these loaves and fishes and now they've gone home and the disciples are away in the boat. He's praying: so much spiritual energy was used in the miracle that this quiet space to pray, alone with God is vital; He needs to take this time to pray so that He will be able for the next challenge; He prays for God's grace and strength and power to help Him and fill Him. I suspect that this is a more regular pattern of Jesus' life than the Bible tells us; we are left to assume that Jesus prayed regularly for the Father to be with Him and help Him. There is something important about being alone in the silence with God, praying, sensing God's presence!

Perhaps Jesus is watching the disciples in the boat, struggling, so He prays for them too. He sees them struggling in the storm and prays with a sense of compassion in His heart for them. They are His friends and He finds it hard to see them struggle like that. He goes to them with that compassion and with a desire to help them, to save them through the storm. He comes to them in the storm; He walks on the water, with great power to be able to do that, but the water is bashing His face, the wind is sweeping through His hair, He is battered about. He comes to help. Then there's Peter with his faith and his doubt; he wants to know, but he's not sure; can he walk on water? He doesn't know what will happen when he gets out of the boat, but Jesus will help Him regardless; Jesus feels for him in the risk he's taking but knowing that He will bring Peter grace no matter what goes on and that power will go out again to bring all of the disciples safely to other side.

"Truly, you..." (Matthew 14:33) That's what we see in this story, the great power that Jesus has over the wind and the waves, over the situations of our lives, the Son of God who is able to help us and save us completely. This is absolutely true: He has the power to do anything and everything and we are inspired to trust Him; He has great power to do for us all that we need. We pray and He is able to answer our prayers; we come to Him in faith and He is able to save us completely. That's what we see of Jesus in this story and it is all about what He is able to do. The disciples rejoiced to see His glory revealed that night and it would stay in their minds forever; so we have the story because they told it again and again and others came to faith in Jesus, the Son of God.

"In bringing..." (Hebrews 2:10f) There's another side to Jesus: Jesus is in the storm, walking; He is not above the storm, He is not immune to the storm, He has not solved the storm before He got there; Jesus is in the storm, getting wet, getting bashed by the wind, just the same as the disciples did! Jesus is One of us, of the same human family as us, made perfect through suffering. To people who say that Jesus had abandoned us and left us when we suffered in the First World War trenches, can we counter that by suggesting that Jesus shared in their suffering, that somehow He was there in the mud of Passchendaele? Can we have a sense of Jesus with us when we're afraid? When life is dark? When we're lying awake at 3am and our trials and our failures and our feelings of being stuck are going round and round in our heads? Hebrews 2 would suggest that Jesus knows all of that and how it feels and comes to help us with compassion in His heart; He is the same family, the same flesh and blood, suffering with us, for us. Does that change our view? Does that sit alongside the glory and

power of the One who stills the storm? For the Bible it does, showing us two sides of that same Saviour!

How easy is it to trust? Trust is so fragile a quality, so easily undermined! How can we trust the Jesus we don't see when find it hard to trust people we do see? But that is our part in this story, to trust – to trust Jesus to answer our prayers; to trust Jesus to be with us in the darkness; to trust Jesus to be with us at school, or in the hard conversation at work, or in the medical ward, or the treatment room; to trust Jesus to save us, to forgive us our sins, to reconcile us with the Father. "If only I could be sure..." Peter wasn't sure; "*why did you doubt?*" (*Matthew 14:31*) Doubt is faith in two minds; Peter in two minds, wanting to take the risk and to trust, but nagging at the back of his mind the question – "What if this doesn't work out?" How easy is it to trust?

Can we be inspired by what we see of Jesus here? The great Son of God who walked on water and stilled the storm? Jesus our "flesh and blood" in the storm with us? How easy is it to trust this Jesus? That's our part in this story, in the story of our faith, the story of our being disciples, that we learn to trust. It is not easy; there will be times when we will feel as if we are sinking, but Jesus is there! Always and everywhere, Jesus is there. Can we learn to trust?