

MATTHEW 14:22-33  
TAKING RISKS!

Eugene Peterson is a retired teacher of theology and a Christian minister. He tells the story of going to give blood. This was in Canada, so it was done by the Red Cross and the nurse asked him questions about himself to see if there was any reason why his blood might not be used. The last question she asked was this: "Do you engage in hazardous work?" His answer came back: "yes", but she was surprised. She looked up from her clipboard; Peterson was wearing a clerical collar, so she knew exactly what he was; she hesitated for a moment, smiled, ignored his answer and ticked "no" on her piece of paper! "I don't mean *that* kind of hazardous!" she said. Peterson said that he would have loved to continue the conversation; what did she mean? But there was a queue of people behind him! In telling the story he went on to write: "Every day I put my faith on the line... in a world where nearly everything can be weighed, explained, quantified,... I persist in making the centre of my life a God whom no eye has seen, nor ear heard, whose will no one can probe. That's a risk!"

Being a disciple is a risky business. We've been looking at what it means to be a disciple today through the eyes of Jesus' twelve disciples. We began by looking at Matthew, called by Jesus to leave his tax toll booth and go with Him; Matthew discovered that he belonged with Jesus, even though he was an outcast in everyone else's eyes. Last week, we talked about the twelve being disciples together, no longer simply individuals in relationship with Jesus, but in relationship with one another too and having to be together and do things together; there was a group solidarity, but there was also the challenge of other people. There is something of a risk in all of that! Being a disciple of Jesus, spending time with Jesus, learning from Him – there is a risk that in our world people don't understand; they think that we may well have lost our marbles to talk like that. There is a risk to shape our lives by the teachings of someone who lived 2000 years ago, through a book that many people write off as dusty and out of date. There is a risk to our credibility; there is a risk to our relationships. But here's the thing: those who have taken that risk tell us that it is worth it; the crowd of witnesses tell us that it works, that it makes sense, that there is treasure beyond price.

Today and next week, the focus is on Peter, the man who would go on to become the leader of the disciples. He has a great future ahead of him, but it was not always obvious at the beginning. There is potential for very good in Peter, but potential for disaster too! There is something encouraging about that because we see something of ourselves in Peter. He is not perfect and sometimes his flaws are very obvious. Peter (called Simon to start off) is a fisherman; he works with his brother Andrew and their business partners James and John. They are based in Capernaum, fishing the Sea of Galilee and Peter has had to leave behind his best ever catch to go to follow Jesus. He has already been following for a time, though the time-scales in the gospels are not always clear. He has seen all kinds of things happen at Jesus' hands, including the healing of his mother-in-law; most recently, he watched Jesus feeding 5000 people with only five loaves and two fish. Jesus sent them away in the boat while He sent the crowd home and went into the hills for some time to pray. Someone has suggested that Jesus is on the hillside praying and watching the little boat work its way across the lake as the storm brews suddenly.

Surely nothing of this storm would bother Peter; he'd seen these storms many times before on the lake; this is his home water, the place where he fished. But some of the others were bothered; some of the twelve were no sailors and they were terrified. The boat is labouring in the storm; they are trying to go into the wind, but are not getting anywhere fast. Jesus watches them from the top of the hill and decides to go down to help them, to bring them some courage. So between 3 and 6am, when it was still

dark, *"Jesus went..."* (Matthew 14:25) If that was designed to help, it actually made matters worse: *"When the..."* (Matthew 14:26) Jesus made them even more afraid; "It's a ghost!" and they were terrified. Jesus tried to calm them down: *"Jesus immediately..."* (Matthew 14:27) "I'm here; everything will be fine now!" but it took a little while for that to work. At the end, the wind died down and the boat reached the other side safely; Jesus had helped His disciples, had shown them again that He is worthy of their trust.

Peter decides to put all of this to the test: *"Lord, if..."* (Matthew 14:28) "Peter, that's a stupid idea; don't do it! You'll sink." Might Andrew, his brother, or any of others, try to stop him? Maybe they were so preoccupied with the storm that they only turned round to see when someone shouted "Peter's getting out of the boat!" "What?!" It is as if this is a test: is it really Jesus? Is Jesus really there? As if to prove it, Peter gets out of the boat. What a risk! On the one hand, faith says that it is Jesus walking on the water; on the other hand, people don't walk on water; they sink! Peter takes the risk and puts his faith to the test by getting out of the boat to walk on water. Here's the thing: Peter walked on water! His faith was rewarded and for as long as his eye was firmly fixed on Jesus, he walked on water. The story tells us that *"When he..."* (Matthew 14:30f) When he took his eye off Jesus, that was when it all began to fall apart and Jesus was there to rescue him.

Risk: this is the first time, but not the last that Peter would risk his life for Jesus. There is a bit of an up-and-down graph of Peter's life when it comes to risk and courage. Here the risk level is high: he might drown if this doesn't work, but his courage and faith prevail and out he gets, walking on the water; there's a story to tell the grandchildren. During Easter week, the story is very different: *"Even if..."* (Matthew 26:35) History tells us that his courage failed him; the risk was too high and he failed; he told the servant girls in the courtyard that he didn't know Jesus; he disowned Jesus rather than risk his life, rather than risk sharing his master's fate. Later, on the day of Pentecost, Peter stands up in the same city, maybe amongst some of the same people and boldly proclaims his faith in Jesus, the faith that 52 days earlier, he was ashamed of. Time and time again, he would stand up in the face of those who would persecute him, beat him, throw him in prison and testify to Jesus, the Saviour of the world; that faith would cost him his life.

As long as he kept his eyes fixed on Jesus, he walked on water; as soon as he stopped looking at Jesus, it all began to fall apart. When Jesus said *"come"*, He invited Peter to trust Him. Jesus invited Peter to put his trust in Him, that He would not fail him, but would support him and help him. Jesus did help him, and support him; so Peter walked on water. The risk paid off, and he had an experience no-one else has had, the thrill of being like Jesus for that split second; Jesus walked on water, Peter did what Jesus did. When Peter took his eyes off Jesus, things began to fall apart; he was no longer trusting Jesus, but seeing all the other things that were going on around him and letting them shape his thinking and make him afraid; so he began to sink. But here's thing: even as he began to sink, even then Jesus saved him: *"Immediately..."* (Matthew 14:31) Peter was in two minds: we say that doubt is the opposite of faith, but the opposite of faith is unbelief. Doubt is faith in two minds: he still believed, but other things were challenging that faith: "is Jesus stronger than the wind? Is Jesus able to keep me afloat? Is Jesus as powerful as we think He is?" These two minds, these doubts, distracted Jesus and made such a difference!

*"Let us..."* (Hebrews 12:2) Concentrate on Jesus. Jesus is the One who saves us, who helps us, who answers our prayers. Keep our eyes focussed on Jesus. Hebrews has been telling us in chapter 11 of those who have lived life by faith; the cloud of witnesses around the Christians to whom Hebrews is written, to support Christians who were going through difficult times, for whom faith was a risky business. Think of

Hampden Park at the Commonwealth Games, the crowd supporting all of the athletes as they strive to compete well. Money, success, family, difficult circumstances – these are all parts of life; there is nothing inherently good or bad in any of these things; sometimes they are good, sometimes they are bad. But what they can do is distract us, make us take our eye off Jesus. Our attitude to life becomes shaped by these other things: for example, if our eye is fixed on money and possessions, everything we do is designed to make sure that we keep money we have or that we are able to acquire more; it might well bring with it the fear of losing it all. Peter saw wind and the wind shaped his attitude to walking on the water, and he became afraid. Looking at the things around us may shape our way of thinking about life, they make us afraid and these fears take over and we begin to sink! Keep your eye fixed on Jesus.

Let faith shape your life! I'm not talking just about coming to Church on Sunday, or being more religious even than that. Let Jesus shape your life! There must be something risky about that, otherwise we'd all sign up straightaway and we'd bring all of our family, friends, neighbours with us and they'd gladly join up too. So let's do a risk assessment on faith in Jesus. It is a good thing to do: Jesus is able to do far more for us than we imagine, to save us, to bring us to God, to bring all the blessings of God into our lives, to answer our prayers; these are all good things, the benefits of faith in Jesus; faith is a good thing to do. What's the risk? Jesus will reshape us, make us new people, will change us, will give us a new set of values and challenge us to live life in a different way, with our whole life shaped by Jesus, attitudes, words, and behaviour. There is a risk attached to that: we'd be different from the crowd, we'd be different from the people we used to be, we'd have to change and we're not always prepared for that! Let faith shape your life.

The risk: let our whole life be shaped by Jesus and by faith. The kind of person that I am shaped by Jesus; my relationships with family, friends, neighbours, people in Church shaped by Jesus; my ways of thinking, my attitudes shaped by Jesus; my words, the way I speak about other people, the way I speak to other people shaped by Jesus. We don't always like being changed; we don't like being different; we're not sure we'll be able to cope. Or you are asked to take up a role in a Church team, a new responsibility, to learn a new skill; the same risks and the same fears come to the surface. For the church as a whole, we talk about shaping the future in a different way; to reshape the building; to reshape the way we do things in worship; to reshape the way we think about life, faith, church, and the community. Churches are amongst the most risk-averse groups in our society; to accept change we need to be certain that it will work. In all of these choices, there is a risk: "Will I be able to do it?" If that's the question we ask, then we're looking the wrong way. The better question is: "Will Jesus be able to help me?" Of course, He will, but will we keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus?

Back to Eugene Peterson: "Every day I put my faith on the line". Our faith is challenged by what happens to us in life and in the world, is challenged by events, by attitudes we see around us, is challenged by the questions in our minds or that other people ask, is challenged by doubts, when our faith is in two minds - "I believe, but maybe!" There are two options: we can retreat into some kind of bubble where nothing of the real world can touch us and we are cocooned, hidden away; or we can take the risk and live by faith. To do that, we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus; He is able to save us, to help us, to answer our prayers; He has blazed a trail before us through life. Being a disciple is a risky business, but the rewards are amazing. Peter walked on water: "It's a stupid idea, Peter; you might drown!" But Jesus said "come" and here's the thing - Peter walked on water! What risks can we take with our eyes fixed on Jesus?