

Ninth Sunday after Trinity, 9th August 2020

[1 Kings 19:9-18](#); [Psalm 85:8-13](#); [Romans 10:5-15](#); [Matthew 14:22-33](#)

'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' Jesus says to Peter.

So how big is your faith? It can feel like an unwise question. People of very strong faith, and there are certainly some, can be more than humbling. Intimidating, even, for the rest of us.

For an example of the kind of thing I mean, and at the risk of being on lockdown repeat, let me go back for a moment to the TV film *Anthony* that Mother Angela talked about online recently. It's still on i-player, it's very good, and it's about the young black Liverpoolian, Anthony Walker, and the life that he might have had in his early 20s if racists had not murdered him in the year 2005, when he was 18.

The film works backwards through his imagined later life. So we see the birth of his first child. He and his wife – the wife he never had - are on a train. Suddenly the baby starts to come; a midwife is luckily on the train too; a whole carriage-load of travellers look on with panic and excitement; finally, the conductor announces that all is well, and that the arrival has been ahead of schedule. This, he adds cheerfully, is not something he often gets to say in his job. If only there could have been that child.

We scroll back to the wedding. A perfect day and a beautiful occasion; a hint that a long-time rift in the wider family might be healed. If only there had been time.

And further back: his acceptance into law school and the civil rights lawyer he might have become; the troubled friend whose life he turned around; the school kids he mentored as a volunteer sports coach. And by the time we reach back to age 18 and there is the fatal attack and the long vigil and all the prayers and the tears, we cannot believe that he will die, because we are so invested in the whole life that, in our imagination, we have seen him lead. A life that was rich and gave joy to others. As every life can and should be. And you are left thinking, how could anyone take away the gift of such a life, any life, for no reason?

But he does die; and back to my point about faith. Because what hit the national headlines at the time, as well as the murder itself, was the response of Anthony's mother, Gee Walker, a committed Christian. She refused to bear the burden of hatred for her son's killers. She forgave them, and said so, almost straightway. At some stage, when she is ready, she has said she will meet them. She has set up a foundation, named for her son, to build racial harmony in education, sports and the arts, and she travels widely to give talks and lead workshops.

That kind of forgiveness. Who could do it? It's so difficult. Does it hold cheap the life that was lost, the wrong that was done? Is it even right or possible to forgive where it's not been asked for; where there is as yet no repentance?

Not every Christian believer has been able to respond to personal tragedy in that way. It was also in 2005 that, in the London bombings, the Revd Julie Nicholson's daughter, Jenny, was killed in the attack at Edgware Road tube station. She, Julie, did not lose her faith in God. But, she did feel that in her grief and her anger she could not at that time, in all conscience, continue to preach forgiveness and preside each week at the eucharist and be a minister of Christ's all-embracing and all-forgiving love. She resigned her orders.

And who is to say she was wrong to do it? There are times and seasons, even in faith, even in ministry.

But I think God's word for us this morning is that when we hit the hardest times in our walk of faith, we have two people to encourage us. One is Saint Peter. The follower who couldn't quite walk on water, but stepped out anyway; who denied Jesus three times, and later declared his love three times; and is the foundation of Christ's church, for all his shortcomings. Perhaps it is about stepping out with the faith that we have, even if there are wobbles, even when it's a leap, even when it's hard.

And there is Jesus. Yes, he sets the bar impossibly high. Seventy-times seven. There will always be times when we fall short of that kind of forgiveness, that kind of faith.

But here is the good news. Faith is also the thing that Jesus commends, more than anything, even when we show just a little of it. If you have faith as small as a mustard seed you can move mountains, Jesus says. Daughter, your faith has made you well, he says to the woman who touched the hem of his cloak. It wasn't about armour-plated self-confidence; she didn't have that. But she knew who Jesus was and she believed in him.

'Lord, increase our faith' was the apostles' prayer to Jesus, after he had talked to them about forgiveness. They knew they would need that faith, now and in the challenges to come. And we need it too, even if sometimes it is just clutching the hem of Jesus' coat.

May we be encouraged in our faith this day. Amen.