



Abington Pastoral Letter No.25 12.08.2020

Dear Friends

### **Open Churchyard Service**

The thermometer in our living room says its 30.5 degree Celsius inside the house now. How are you coping with this heat wave? I hope you are staying cool and hydrated. Or you might be enjoying the sunshine and having a lovely time outside as though you are on holiday in Spain.

The plan to resume our public worship continues and we aim to hold an open churchyard service on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August at 10 am if the weather is okay. It will be holy communion service and I intend to keep it as simple and relaxed as possible. Please bring your own chairs or picnic blankets if you wish to sit down. You can also just stand and wander around while keeping the safe distance if you wish.

If you are interested in coming to this service then please let Dianne Ward, who is one of our Churchwardens, know by giving her a ring on 01604 281264. That will help us to know how many we might be expecting to turn out and make appropriate preparations.

Please note that there is a chance that we might have to cancel it depending on the weather or the advice from the local council. I will let you know via email and through Church Facebook Page, if we have to cancel the service last minute. And if that happens, we will simply revert back to online service from the church.

If you have any questions please do feel free to contact me.

### **Sermon on Jesus walking on water (Matthew 14.22-33)**

Last Sunday, Prester preached for us on Matthew 14.22-33. Thank you Prester. Here is his sermon.

*May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.*

*I wonder if you ever felt that everything seems to be stacking up against you? You may remember the infamous quote from Kenneth Williams, playing Julius Caesar in a Carry on film. About to be stabbed, he cries: infamy, infamy, they've all got in it in – for -me!*

*More often, it's not so much people but circumstances that seem to be stacking up against us. Almost the entire world now understands what it means to have a virus threatening our entire day to day existence. Covid has affected whether or how we work or go to school, how many people we can or can't have in our own home, whether we can go shopping, eat out, watch sport, go to a concert, or go on holiday. Many people's lives have been changed, some will remain changed, and sadly some are no longer with us.*

*On top of this are the more familiar examples of what Hamlet calls "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that flesh is heir to". In recent times my family have been facing illness, accident, and medical procedures. Many or all of you will be facing your own issues at the moment, some Covid related, some not.*

*The disciples in today's reading certainly had things stacked against them. They just experienced the feeding of the 5000, an event which must have been a tremendous spiritual "high." Jesus had produced or multiplied loaves and fishes in a way which ought to have reminded them of God providing manna for the Israelites in the wilderness. We know the crowds were impressed. In the parallel account in John's gospel (6:15) we read that Jesus knew they intended to come and make him King by force. He sidesteps this by sending the crowds away, telling the disciples to go ahead, and spending time alone on the mountainside in prayer.*

*When the disciples started out it seems the sea was calm, perhaps like it was when Liz and I had the privilege of visiting Galilee. The*

*Disciples are doing what Jesus told them, up comes a storm. I find it comforting that the simple fact things are against you is NOT, by itself, an indication you are out of God's will. Their boat is buffeted by the wind and the waves.*

*Visitors to the Holy Land today can go on the Sea of Galilee –actually it's not a sea, but the world's lowest freshwater lake, about 13 miles long by 8 miles wide. You go on a boat similar to the one shown in the picture. It gives some protection and, crucially, has an engine. The disciples*

*had no such luxury. Their boat would have looked like this model (next picture.) How do we know? Because in 1986, at a time of drought, two local fishermen uncovered a boat in the mud. Carbon dating dates it between 100BC and 70 AD. It's been recovered and carefully restored. It's kept in a climate controlled museum and looks like this (next picture). No cosy cabin and, of course, no engine! Back on board with the disciples, it's dark: no artificial lights from the shore. The wind and storm are stacked against them. They're tired. Fit as they were, used to the winds coming down from the hills and whipping up a storm as they were, they must have been tempted to go back.*

*And then it happens. Suddenly, through the storm, they see what should be a familiar figure. "Early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake (14:15.)" It's Jesus and he is walking on the water. You'd expect them to be amazed and delighted. Instead, in the gloom, "they were terrified, saying it's a ghost!! And they cried out in fear." (14: 26)*

*Jesus immediately responds: Take heart (or take courage) It is I; do not be afraid. (14:27) I believe that's the first thing he would say to us, facing our own crises, Covid and otherwise. Take heart. Why? It is I - the Greek rendering for "I am", a phrase used repeatedly in John's gospel. It also echoes God's revelation of Himself to Moses in Exodus (3:14): "I am." In the midst of the storm, Jesus is with them. It's a word for the disciples, and it's a word for us. As so often happens, Peter is first to respond. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." (14:28) Notice what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say Peter, that's a pretty silly idea even for you! What he does say is Come: a word of encouragement and welcome. Jesus' response to faith is always come.*

*To use the words of a book by John Ortberg, Peter recognised that If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat. Out of the boat he gets, and, for a few faltering steps at least, he walks on water too.*

*Some people have problems with this story. Humans are denser than water – therefore they sink. Simple science. But if, behind the known processes of science, there is a powerful creator God who chose to enter his creation in the person of Jesus, then I suggest the problem shrinks significantly. As CS Lewis wrote, "it is difficult to imagine God as man – but the physical sciences also propose for our belief much that cannot be imagined." He called the incarnation "the grand miracle". He argued that if Jesus is God in the flesh then other miracles could follow, including of the resurrection. I respectfully agree.*

*My problem with this story is not that Jesus walked on water but that, for a while at least, Peter did too. If he did, so could others. This story challenges me to accept that Jesus wants his*

disciples to learn to respond in faith in difficult situations. Christians down the ages have done so, women as well as men. Today is Mary Sumner day, the day when we remember the founder of The Mothers Union. Her "getting out of the boat" was learning to overcome her anxiety over public speaking. From 1885, when the Bishop of Winchester asked her to speak at a large women's congress in Portsmouth, to the end of the 19th century, the MU movement grew to 169,000 members. Today the MU has more than 4 million members worldwide in 84 countries. What a legacy!

So how might this apply to you and me? By instinct I am more like Thomas, wanting proof, than Peter, showing impulsive faith. But thirty one years ago I had the clear sense that God wanted me to set up my own legal firm, specialising in legal aid cases. I could have given a lot of reasons why that might not have been a good idea. But I had the clear sense this was what God was calling me to. Friends agreed. "Come on, Prester, it's time. Just do it!"

I needed two things: a good PA / secretary, and an office. I told a friend my plans. She had previously worked as a legal secretary. "Isn't that interesting?" she said. "I gave in my notice last week. " She went on to work with me for several years. I told a church leader friend I was starting my own practice, had a secretary, but needed an office. He thought for just a few seconds then said; "You can have my office. I'll move upstairs." I worked from that office for two years before moving on to a larger one. I discovered that where God calls, he also provides.

It may not have been literally walking on water, but I was responding in faith to what I understood as Jesus' Come. (I can show you a picture of me standing in, rather than on, the lake in Galilee.) Sadly, Peter didn't stay walking on the water very long. "When he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened and began to sink." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"(14: 30 -31.)

They got back in the boat and the wind immediately died down. No wonder those in the boat worshipped him, saying "Truly you are the Son of God" (14:33.)

I have to confess that, like Peter, I have taken my eye off Jesus at times. Doubts can creep in. But, like the psalmists, I can meditate on the good things God has done, in the Bible, in history, and in my own life also. When I do, it may take a while, but I am lifted up, and put back on more solid ground.

So if you're feeling discouraged by circumstances this morning, take heart. Try taking your eyes off your circumstances for a while. Focus them back on Jesus. Be open to the fact that he wants to restore you. Be open to the possibility that he may have something special for you to do,

*either as an individual, or as part of the congregation. I close with some words engraved on a plate put up by Christians at the lakeside near where these things occurred.*

*The deeds and miracles of Jesus are not actions of the past. Jesus is waiting for those who are still prepared to take risks at His word because they trust His power utterly.*

### **Zoom Prayer Group**

The Zoom Prayer Group, led by Liz Kelly, continues. They gather every Thursday at 10 am on Zoom. If you are interested please contact Liz on 01604 636947.

### **Ride and Stride Event, Saturday 12th September 2020**

The 'Ride and Stride' event, organised by the Historic Churches Trust, is a fundraising opportunity to visit some of our wonderful churches in the diocese and further afield. The event is taking place this year although participants are asked to obey all the Covid-19 rules which apply at the time. Some church buildings may not be open (Abington Church also will stay closed during the event), however those taking part are encouraged to walk or cycle to as many participating churches between 10 am and 6 pm. Before the event participants are asked to obtain sponsorship from family and friends. The money collected will be divided equally between the Northamptonshire Historic Churches Trust and Abington church.

Cathy Tinsley (cathytinsley18@gmail.com or 07516979223) is the Local Organiser this year and would be delighted to hear from anyone who might like to support this event, either as a recorder, a participant or as a sponsor. Those who have taken part in previous years have always enjoyed the event. Cathy can email or post you information about 'Ride and Stride', including the list of participating churches and the sponsorship forms. Thank you.

Stay safe everyone and God bless you all.

With love in Christ

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