

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Trinity 9 (9 August)

Matthew 14:22-33

(with reference to 1 Kings 19:9-18 & Romans 10:5-15)

Before Bagshot Park returned to being a Royal residence (upon the marriage of the Wessexes), it was for many years the head office of the Army Chaplains' department. When I was a student at theological college, I attended two residential courses run by the Army, based at the Park. In its grounds was a large ornamental pond, in the middle of which stood a signpost that read, "Walking on this water is not permitted". Whether the Earl and Countess have ever tried that, I have no idea – but it was just as well Jesus never turned up either as He might have been banned!

Today's scripture ticks all the boxes as far as a miracle story is concerned, giving the author, the reader – and even the preacher – a classic example that continues to underline just who Jesus was. Here was no ordinary human – ordinary humans do not have the ability to balance on the surface of a liquid – here was someone whose total behaviour oozed the reality of 'otherness' – here was someone clearly very different to the occupants of the boat involved, a point conclusively proved by Peter's inadequacy as he began to drown. In a sense, little more need be said, beyond the ability of today's extract simply re-emphasising what people of faith already know.

But, do they? How strong is our faith? How close are we to the character of Jesus in today's story compared with that of Peter – and how fickle might we be when considering the reaction of the others? There is a slightly barbed edge to this scripture, the alternative of wording perhaps implying that Jesus might also have said, "Oh! For goodness sake, when are you going to get the message?" The constant repetition of human naivety in scripture can get quite exhausting for God – and you can imagine Him wondering, "Why did I bother?"

The overriding sense behind this scripture – and also that of the other two readings set for Trinity 9 (1 Kings 19:9-18 & Romans 10:5-15, if you wish to read them) – is that until there is a clear understanding and strength of faith in an individual, nothing else matters. Novelty actions, high drama, tedious preaching, pious praying – none have any true validity until they are accompanied by a depth of faith. As individuals, we simply have to believe – believe enough to be able to confidently 'walk on water' – believe enough to see all in the context of our relationship with God. Believe because we want to believe.

No one, of course, is forcing us to believe. We could read today's extract from the Bible as merely another 'crazy' propaganda story, designed to hoodwink people into thinking there is something powerful in this "religion" business; we can even make a joke of it all, as in the pond at Bagshot Park. We could totally dismiss it all in a "Trumpian-fake-news" fashion! Or, we could be convinced. We could be further 'wowed'. We could be uplifted by the spectacle. We could feel the reality within. Jesus laments of the disciples, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" We could reverse that sentence, "You of great faith, well done for believing!" However much we may not be able to physically walk on water, we do have the power to transform that sentiment – by our actions, our desires, and our sheer determination. Faith can indeed be a very powerful entity in our human lives if we but want it to be.

And such is important to realise when life and its circumstances perhaps change the course of our destiny, or events outside of our control inflict diversion. It may not be easy to maintain the familiarity of past practice; it may not be possible to access established resources; it may not feel appropriate to continue subscribing to old ideas – but if faith lies at the very core of our being, such phenomena will be of little concern for they will move quietly to the sidelines of our lives to enable new vistas to appear. Faith lies at the key to all dimensions – and if faith lies at the heart of absolutely all that we are, such vistas will be fuelled by the power and presence of a mighty God.

If we look at the Old Testament reading (1 Kings 19:9-18), we can see Elijah's encounter with God in the sound of sheer silence. Not in the high drama of storms and earthquakes and fire, but in the sanctity of a 'nothingness' that proves to be far from that. This concept of God's quiet permeance can be a most powerful dimension to our faith, for it reminds us that we do not need great 'showy' gestures, vast structures or elaborate ceremony – we do not even need words. The power of the stillness of God transforming the very soul within is beyond measure; and it is to such that we should gain renewed faith in these times of evolving change. Life does not stand still – and our current "virus" world reminds us of just how radically it can change – so neither should our faith.

But we must not imagine that such faith is the preserve of merely us – and Paul in the other reading (Romans 10:5-15) quietly, but firmly, reminds us that we must not be selfish about our faith. Indeed, we must live and breathe and exude it in the very person that we are so that others will see, be attracted, and be open to its influence. This can often be the more challenging dimension of today's overall theme, but Jesus implies that it is vital to faith's true task. We should not want to be like the disciples initially were in their 'OTT' reaction to what they had witnessed – we should be confident enough to have realised it could all have happened in the first place. The walking on water meant nothing without the conviction of faith that surrounded it.

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