



Worship at Home with Professor John Sawkins; Rev Easter Smart and Duncan Cameron—9 August 2020

The Scripture Readings are taken from:

Matthew 14 v 22—33 and Psalm 89 v 1—9, read by Duncan Cameron

Opening Prayers

Approach to God (Confession)

Faithful God, We gather this morning in Your presence:

Those of us for whom worship is a regular part of our lives, and those of us for whom it is not.

Those who are full of faith and those who don't know what we believe.

Those who can hardly keep from singing, and those who can barely face the day.

We gather because You have called us, because You love us, because You are our God.

We gather, not because we are good or pure or holy, but because of our need.

We gather, knowing that again and again we have failed to live as You would have us live, that we have not loved one another, that we have not loved Your creation, that we have not loved You, that we have not loved ourselves.

Forgive us, God, and renew us to be Your people.

Make us one, and reassure us in our true identity as children of the One who is above all things. For we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, Our faithful and forgiving friend Amen

Thanksgiving

Before the world began, You loved us.

Before You had created us, You were faithful to us.

And we, as Your people, are thankful for Your great and abiding love, shown again and again down the ages.

You have never abandoned us, even when we have abandoned you.

You have never forgotten us, even when we have strayed far from the path.

We praise You, faithful God, for the steadfast love which has always guided us, for the promise which has never faltered, for the light which has lightened our way, for the story which has reminded us of those who came before us.

For Your steadfast love and mercies new with each morning, We join with one the voice To give You praise and thanks. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

Please check the Kirk website for John's Sermon: <http://www.curriekirk.org/>

Dear Friends of Currie Kirk. Please get in touch with the Kirk Office (451 5141) if you need anything.

We have friends willing to listen, shop, walk a dog, fix a garden.

Website: <https://www.curriekirk.org/> or <https://www.facebook.com/CurrieKirk/>

Matthew 14: 22-33
Jesus Walks on the Water

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."



And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Psalm 89

A maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite.

I will sing of the LORD's great love forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known
through all generations.
I will declare that your love stands firm forever,
that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.
You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant,
'I will establish your line forever
and make your throne firm through all generations

The heavens praise your wonders, LORD,
your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.
For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD?
Who is like the LORD among the heavenly beings?
In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared;
he is more awesome than all who surround him.
Who is like you, LORD God Almighty?
You, LORD, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you.

You rule over the surging sea;
when its waves mount up, you still them.

I will sing of the
LORD'S great LOVE forever,

with my mouth I will make your
faithfulness known through all generations.

I will declare that your
LOVE stands firm forever,
that you have established your
faithfulness in heaven itself.

Psalm 89:1-2

PsalmsQuotes.com



Sermon in Lockdown

Keeping our Eyes Fixed on Jesus (Jesus Walks on Water)

From Matthew's Gospel, chapter 14 and verse 27, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Introduction

As many of you know I do my day job a mile down the road from Currie Kirk at Heriot-Watt University. Since lockdown, I've been working from home of course, but the campus grounds at Riccarton have remained open to members of the local community, and I'm pleased to say they have been well used for socially distanced walking, cycling and running.

Like other universities Heriot-Watt is now getting ready for the new academic year which starts on Monday 14th of September. And the question I get asked more than any is "what will the next academic year be like?"

Now, lots of people are working on different aspects of what we do next year, but my job as part of that team is to coordinate how we will be organising our teaching.

Since the start of lockdown I've convened a weekly meeting on a Monday involving about 50 staff from across our five campus locations to discuss what we need to do to get our teaching up and running again. There's a lot to think about. Here are some examples:

We need to think through how we deliver lectures when we can't fill our lecture theatres. We need to work out how many chairs we can allow in each of our teaching rooms to ensure we don't break any social distancing rules. And then there's the timetable.

How do we put together a timetable when some teaching is going to be online and some face to face? And how do we make sure that those students who have no access to broadband or a safe and secure study space at home, can get onto the campus to work? And I could go on.

But these are, if you like, the problems that we can identify, and work out a plan for, and solve.

The thing we can't solve is the Covid19 pandemic itself—and the sense of anxiety and fear it has brought with it.

Oh yes, we can and will work out one-way systems and where to put hand gel dispensers and what to do about face masks.

But in all that planning the thing that must come above everything else is the health, safety and wellbeing of our students and our staff.

So when people ask 'what will next year be like' I can explain how we will deliver teaching and how the timetable will run and how social distancing will work, but I can't do much to calm their perfectly reasonable fears about the pandemic itself.

And it's fear, of course, that stops us in our tracks and makes us start to sink under the weight of concern we carry.

Gospel Reading

And so to today's gospel reading and this strange account of Jesus walking on the water. Let's remind ourselves of the scene.

It's early in the morning, the disciples are in a boat which is being battered by the wind some way from land. They look up and they see Jesus walking towards them. But humans don't walk on water so they think it's a ghost and they cry out in fear.

And then the ghost speaks. It's not a ghost. It's Jesus himself. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." He says.

And then Peter – and it had to be Peter – a bit wilful and headstrong and impulsive as usual, says, well, if it really is you, tell me to come and walk on the water as well.

Perhaps thinking he had called a ghost's bluff, the ghostly figure says "come". And Peter now caught up in the exchange steps out and actually walks on the water too.

But then some bit of his rational brain kicks in and he looks at the waves whipped up by the wind, and he gets frightened and in that instant begins to sink. And as soon as he begins to sink his fear increases so he shouts out 'Lord, save me'. There's no doubt in his mind now, that it is Jesus, and not a ghost, he's speaking to. And Jesus reaches out and catches him and they get safely into the boat.

Now put to one side the mechanics of all of this because if we get caught up and fixated on those we will miss out on the truth at the heart of this story.

The remarkable part of this story is not that Jesus walked on water. That's almost taken for granted in the narrative. The most remarkable thing about the story is that Peter walked on water.

And how he walked on water is clearly stated. He looked at Jesus. And how he began to sink is clearly stated too. He looked at the wind and the waves.

There we have the central truth of this story.

When we look to Jesus, the One for whom all things are possible, we are given the courage to step out from relative safety into an unknown future. And when we turn our eyes away from him and get distracted, our fears take over, and we begin to sink.

History

This story and that image contains a truth that explains so much about the way in which the cause of justice and truth and wholeness and love has advanced throughout history.

It has inspired generations of disciples and would-be disciples of Jesus to take up great causes, despite the impossible odds. The provision of education and healthcare for all regardless of ability to pay, campaigns to end the appalling slave trade and promote civil rights, movements to bring justice to countries crushed by debt, individual and collective efforts to challenge vested interests, rigged and unjust systems, and powerful people.

The people who took up these great causes and work for them still, knew the wind was blowing against them, knew the seas were rough and the boat fragile, and yet they caught sight of Jesus, and took courage and stepped out of the boat and began to do the impossible.

Personal Questions

John Bell, sometime leader of the Iona Community, and regular contributor to the Today Programme's Thought for the Day linked this gospel story to our own in these words which I quote,¹

"Do you remember the days when you were first fascinated by Jesus Christ?"

¹Chapter 8, *Eyes Fixed on Jesus*, John L Bell, *Wrestle and Fight and Pray. Christianity and Conflict*. Publ St Andrew press 1993.

Do you remember the days when you took seriously what he said before what anyone else said, and discovered that what he said had a truer and deeper ring to it?

Do you remember the days when – albeit for a short time – you believed that to come to worship in church was really to approach the gates of heaven; and that things could happen, things could change in the company of God’s people; and they did?

Do you remember the days when you took to heart all the words in Scripture about God’s burning passion for justice....and so you got in on the act, either collecting for Christian Aid or writing to your MP or praying fervently for an end to the war in Aden or Vietnam or whatever; because God was a God of peace, and you sensed somehow that this was more real, more important than the thousand other things that demanded your attention?

And being so fascinated by Jesus Christ
Being so engrossed in his kingdom
Being so convinced of his love,
You walked on water.

And then....
And then...
You looked at the waves
You became aware of the worries
You thought the task was too big and you were too small
You heard the voice of those who said ‘You don’t believe that nonsense’
You saw the more you did the more there seemed to be yet to do...
And then...‘Help me Jesus...I’m sinking [Drowning]’”

Our Christian Life

The story of Peter walking on the water contains many truths about our Christian existence. Two stand out for me.

The first is that, as disciples of Christ, we may find ourselves in what feels like a small and fragile boat on rough seas. The winds of uncertainty brought by Covid19 have frightened and scared us.

Christianity is not an insurance policy whose premium is occasional attendance at Sunday worship. The Gospel is not a safe harbour from the storm.

But second is that, when we huddle in our boat in the middle of rough seas, we have a choice. We have to decide who or what is going to attract our attention. Who or what we will look at. The wind and the waves, or the one who walks on them?

The Future

We know, don’t we, that Covid19 will pass. That some day, perhaps in the next few months, a safe and reliable vaccine will be found, the gyms and swimming pools will open, we will be able to shake hands and sit close to others on the bus and recover our confidence and lose our fear.

But then what?

As the storm passes will we settle back down in the relative safety of our little boat, or will we look to Jesus who calls us again and again to join in the building of God’s Kingdom on earth.

Will we try the impossible – the reversal of climate change, the reform of structures which perpetuate racial injustice, the closing of the yawning gap between rich and poor.

Too much!

Look at the wind, look at the waves! I can't do that. The church, the small, reduced, powerless church cannot do that.

Take heart! Says Christ. Do not be afraid. Step out of the boat and walk keeping your eyes fixed on me. Be brave in your work. Be bold in your ambition. Work that God's kingdom might come on earth as in heaven.

Only keep your eyes fixed on me.

"Let us [therefore] keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end." [*Hebrews chapter 12 v 2 GNB*]

Amen.



Eternal God, Creator of the way, Finder of the lost, Guide of the trusting, You are good to all, and your compassion is over all you have made. We thank you that you sent Jesus to share in our earthly life and we thank you that you are a death-defying God who, in raising Jesus, proved that death cannot keep us in its grasp. We ask you to pour out your generous love upon us and bless our souls. You are our heaven-sent healer who can make our lives shine with radiant joy.

To you, our parents cried in faith and were not put to shame. You are the healer of every world. You understand the pain and you bring healing. We pray that you will mend broken bones, calm distressed spirits, and bind up broken hearts. Comfort all who grieve and give to them your peace.

We pray for our nation and its leaders. Grant them your wisdom to help us through these Pandemic times. We pray for the leaders of all nations-keep our lands from corruption. We pray that a shared concern for humanity would help us to work for the good of the poor and suffering.

We pray for all those who work in the field of education. Bless all the staff in Universities who are preparing to welcome students back to campus. Bless our schools as they anticipate a new teaching year and bless all the pupils and their families. Help us to look after one another and protect us from fear or illness.

Loving God, you know those names which are written on our hearts, the members of our family and our friends for whom we worry or are concerned. Hear our prayers for them we pray and do for them as you know best. Relieve their pain and strengthen those who are weak. Cheer those who are despairing and help us to do our part. Bless each of us so that you may bring us in our own time to the passage from life, through death to that better life in sure and certain faith with Christ who promises to be with us now and forever.

Hear us now as we share the prayer he taught us to pray. .

Our Father, who art in heaven; hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever.

Amen.