

Testing the water

Matthew 14: 22-33 – Peter walks on water

When our children were about 12 and 8, we enjoyed a couple of family holidays at a great outdoor activity centre called Mount Severn in Llanidloes in mid-Wales. And it was there that we tried abseiling for the first time. I don't know if you've ever abseiled but there is a moment when, fully kitted out in safety gear and holding the hand of an instructor, you transfer your hold to the rope securing you to the side of the rock edge, and you lean back allowing the rope to take your weight. You hear the creak of the rope and pulley as you lean over the void below and trust that it will hold, that everything has been properly fixed in place, that it will enable you to safely lower yourself down, one push away from the rock face at a time. But it's a really anxious moment, particularly that first abseil, as you place your trust, your life, in the hands of an instructor and a rope.

When Jesus says '*Come*' to Peter on the water in today's gospel reading, I imagine that Peter may well have felt some of the trepidation that I did at the start of that first abseil. We read that it was Peter's idea: '*Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water.*' But we also know that Peter wasn't someone who always engaged brain before mouth, and he may well have regretted his words once they were out. Because people don't walk on water, do they? And there was the danger of sinking, of failing while everyone was watching, and we read that this is exactly what happened. Peter allowed his nerves to get the better of him, he took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink. But immediately Jesus reached out his hand and all was well again.

Just as I needed to depend completely on the knowledge and experience of the abseiling instructor, so Peter needed to depend completely on Jesus. But this was a day where the disciples had already learned a lot about Jesus, lessons that are as relevant for us today as they were for Jesus' friends so many years ago.

When you're in a difficult situation, the best help is someone who is prepared to drop everything to come to your aid. Someone on whom you can depend to be there for you. How did Peter know that Jesus would save him? Because Jesus had spent the whole day demonstrating his compassion for his people and meeting their needs. Remember how the day began? We heard about it in our Bible reading last week. Jesus had just learned of the death of John the

Baptist and he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. But he'd been side-tracked by the needs of the crowd who had followed him seeking healing. Overwhelmed with compassion for them, he spent the day healing their sick, and then, when the disciples brought to Jesus' attention the fact that the people were hungry and had little food, Jesus again demonstrates compassion by feeding tens of thousands with just a few loaves and fish.

After sending the disciples away and dismissing the crowd, we're then told that, when he was alone, Jesus went up onto a mountainside to pray. At this particular time, there was many a problem on Jesus' mind and many a burden on his heart. Not only had John just been executed, but there was the growing hostility of the orthodox people – the scribes and Pharisees; and political hotheads were wanting to make him a nationalistic Messiah against his will. So, it's no surprise that he spends hours alone on the hills with God his Father in prayer.

A word of explanation about the watches of the night. The Jewish night ran from 6pm to 6am, and it was divided into four watches – 6pm to 9pm; 9pm to midnight; midnight to 3am; and 3am to 6am. So Jesus had been praying a long time, after what would have been a really long and tiring day. Remarkable that he was still awake, at about 3am (the fourth watch of the night) he looks from the mountainside out across the lake and sees the disciples struggling to reach the other side. This isn't a storm that is endangering their lives, but they find themselves stuck in the middle of the lake, fighting against the wind after hours of strenuous rowing. They are going nowhere fast. Jesus can see their struggle and he re-joins them by striding out across the water.

And again, see what happens here. Immediately Jesus saw his friends in trouble, his own problems were set aside; the moment for prayer was past. The time for action had come; he forgot himself and went to the help of his friends. That is of the very essence of Jesus. The cry of human need to him surpasses all other claims. It's three in the morning. He's probably desperate for sleep but his friends need him, so he drops everything and goes.

The waves and the wind don't appear to have thrown the disciples into a panic – all we're told is that they were straining at the oars because the wind was against them. What throws them into a panic is the sight of Jesus walking alongside them on the water, and thinking that he is a ghost, they cry out in fear.

Now, I want to cut the disciples some slack at this point. You're on a lake; you've been struggling against the wind for hours; you're probably way off course wondering if you'll ever hit ground. What you least expect is someone to appear from nowhere walking on water! I know they've seen Jesus do some pretty amazing things – heal the sick, drive out demons, calm a storm, raise a child from the dead, produce enough food for about 10,000 from five loaves and two fish, but *walk on water*? It simply doesn't happen, does it?

Of all the disciples, Peter may have been the least convinced that it's Jesus as he's the one who demands some proof. '*Lord, if it's you*' he says, '*then tell me to come to you on the water.*' Jesus seemingly rises to the challenge and replies with just one word, '*Come*'.

And that's what I feel Jesus saying to us today in these uncertain, difficult days. '*Come*'. If you're in a situation where you've been metaphorically straining at the oars for hours, trying to discern a way forward in your own strength, Jesus says '*Come. Come and allow me to draw alongside and help.*'

If, like Peter, you're in a situation where you've stepped out, tested the water and got it wrong, he says '*Take my hand and let me walk alongside you. You of little faith, why did you doubt?*' And it's a message that runs through both the Old and New Testaments. Remember those words of the Lord in Isaiah 43: '*When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down. When you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end – Because I am God, your personal God.*' It was true for the people of Israel in captivity in Babylon 500 years before Jesus. It was true for Peter on a lake in a storm, and it's true for us too, whatever individual situations we are facing.

This story tells us much about the person of Jesus and his concern for each and every one of us, but it also teaches us about the power of prayer too. As we picture Jesus on the mountainside praying through the night, we are reminded that when problems threaten to overwhelm us, it's important to take time out to pray - in a quiet place, alone. It's unlikely to be a mountainside in the Fens of Cambridgeshire but we should all be able to find a quiet place to be with our Lord. It was praying to his Father that helped Jesus face what was ahead of him. And this is what Jesus means when he says '*Come*'.

In prayer, '*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and*

humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.' All too often, we undermine the importance and power of prayer, forgetting that it sustained Jesus time and time again, and can sustain us too. If you need help to pray, then please get in touch and we can chat about what might help.

So, to conclude. Know that Jesus is someone on whom you can depend. Someone on whom you can lean into and allow to take the strain, who will say, *'Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid.'* And take time out regularly to pray as, if you do, prayer will be the *first* thing you turn to in difficulty, rather than the last. Jesus' invitation to us is to *'Come'*. To draw near to him and allow him to be the personal friend and Saviour he came to be. So come.