

SERMON 13 AUGUST 2017

I wonder what and how you think of this book, this book we call the Bible. If this were a workshop and not a sermon, I might ask you to talk to one another about that. The Bible is an extraordinary “thing”: not simply a book, because, to start with, it is a collection of books of several different kinds and origins. There is a whole range of approaches to reading it, to hearing what it has to say to us. There are those who deem that it is literally the word of God, dictated to Moses, in the case of the Hebrew Scriptures, to those who see it is a record that contradicts itself, is full of very ungodly material that has no relevance to life today. Amongst the former group there are those who think it is wrong to make the Bible the object of scholarly study, as if doing that in some way diminishes the word of God. There are, however, those who have seen how much richness is revealed, continually, by delving into the text and what lies behind and within it. Maybe we have been tempted to see the Bible as something that we know contains words that are very relevant to the story of Christianity, rooted, as it is, with the covenant people, the Hebrew people of the Scriptures, but whose words no longer really address us closely. After all, what does it tell us about climate change, or things like abortion, global financial crises, and so on? And then there are stories that just don't sit within our modern world, like walking on water or all those healing stories.

What I am suggesting is that what we find within the Bible may depend on how we come to it. The very dissonance between what we see at face value and our lives now, is where we may discover new richness. The Bible holds so many layers, so many threads of meaning, threads that may seem to be tangled into knots, so sometimes we leave them aside as being too complicated to unravel. If we examine the words too closely, we may shut out the level of imagining that is one of the ways in which the text addresses us. Reading the Bible is not just an exercise of the mind. It touches into the realm of the Spirit and we are not always so prepared to go there because it is counter to our scientific and rational mindsets.

The gospel story we heard today is one such story that has many layers. Let's start with the more rational one, the one where scholarship gives us some leads. It is well accepted that the story of Jesus coming to his disciples who are adrift in the boat in the rising wind is not just an account of that event but is also an important metaphor. In an earlier chapter Jesus has been in the boat with them when a storm blew up. He was asleep and the disciples were afraid they would capsize and sink, so they woke him up and he stilled the storm. As with today's story, people would recognise

not just the ways storms did arise so quickly on the Sea of Galilee but also how stormy their own lives often were. In today's story the disciples are on their own, after a tiring day, surrounded by the crowds who had been so miraculously fed, as they had been themselves. Jesus had gone away into the hills, needing time alone with God. As the storm rises, Jesus comes to them walking across the water. Matthew's small Christian community, recognise what it is like to be adrift and feel alone as the winds blow them about. They feel vulnerable. But then Jesus comes.

The people also hear Matthew's account of Peter, the leader, whose faith and hopes make him decide to leave the relative safety of the boat and step out onto the water. He has seen Jesus do it. He believes that Jesus shows the way and he wants to be with him. Notice that it is not Jesus who calls him to come, it is Peter's own impulsive desire. But, it seems, his little faith doesn't cope with the battering of the wind. It is not even the apparent impossibility of walking on the water that does for him, but the power of the gale. He needs help and cries out to Jesus, who stretches out his hand to pull him up. They both then get in with the others and the wind dies down. We can imagine how the other disciples in the boat can't believe Peter's apparent stupidity. Jesus may seem to have accused Peter as being of little faith, but maybe this is more a lesson in both being aware of the miracles that can happen as we step out in faith but also, when we falter, discovering that when we call out, Jesus' outstretched hand can reach across and pull one to safety. The little faith was enough, after all, enough to walk on water until too much attention was paid to the blowing wind. We may remember also that, not long before this, Jesus had told his disciples that even a little faith was enough to move mountains.

We can imagine how this metaphor might translate for Matthew's community. We can probably also see how it may stretch across the centuries to what it feels like with the challenges that face so many churches in our times? The vulnerability that we may feel in our churches today, surrounded as we are by the powerful currents of the secular or multi-faith society with all our global interconnectedness and challenges, this vulnerability may be different from what was challenging Matthew's community, or even the disciples around Jesus, but the metaphor still addresses us. Metaphors call for us to engage with our imagination because they are not literal comparisons. So how might we tease out these threads so that we may find the things that connect and make meaning for us? Can we recognise the feeling of being small and rather vulnerable as there are powerful things threatening us? I have had some memorable experiences of being in the quite small open boat that

used to be the ferry across the Sound of Iona; of the boat turning to head into the waves that came rolling down, an enormous swell after a gale; of the bow rising up and then crashing down; of being terrified and trying not to show it to my two young children who just asked if I could swim. The boat was the only safety there was.

What was it like to feel leaderless at this time, even if several of these disciples were experienced boatmen? When we realise our dependence on someone who is not there, it can be doubly disconcerting. Remember it is night, so dark, and in the darkness feelings become intensified. Their imaginations were probably running riot. But then, what is this they see through the gloom? A ghost? Here we need to tease out another thread. The storm metaphor and all that goes with it in this story has a spiritual dimension. Which of us does not know the struggle to hold firm to faith when circumstance and doubt attack us and leave us feeling alone? Where is Jesus for us when we need him? There is darkness and violence and forces which can feel deathly around us. But then, as the story recounts, something seemingly impossible takes place. We are being offered something that crashes through all that our rational minds tell us. Jesus is coming, by the most direct means, walking across the water! Of course it doesn't make sense. It isn't meant to. It is meant to push us out from our customary ways of thinking and being. How do we find that Jesus comes to us in the middle of our storms? These are the time when we find that our healing and safety often comes through surprising things that break through our habitual patterns. It is at such times that our faith is restored because we suddenly realise that Christ is not limited by the things we think should happen. These are breakthrough moments when a whole new vista is opened up and we resonate with what we see because, in spite of the unexpectedness, we know it is authentic. So we may, indeed, want to get alongside Jesus in this extraordinary moment. We may want to step out of the boat and be part of this newness. It's ok! The water holds us! But, what on earth are we doing? We question. Doubt sets in and we flounder and begin to sink. But all is not lost. The caring of Christ that brought him to us across the water still holds us and we are safe again. How does that feel now? We have seen something we will never forget. We have a new understanding of how this Christ cannot be contained but will always breakthrough our restrictions and come to us.

We function on many different levels and we need them all: the rational, the spiritual, the imaginative, the psychological. There is no right way or wrong way to engage, because, in whatever way it happens, all this is about God seeking to come to us so

that we may find that Christ is with us, addressing us, speaking to our fears and hesitations, our loneliness and darkness. Whichever way we look at it, we are reminded that our small stories are all held within the infinitely greater story that is God's relationship to God's people. That is a story that reaches back throughout time, beyond our knowledge. For the Jewish people, much of what they heard and saw in Jesus carried echoes of their past story with God – of Moses parting the waters so their ancestors could cross; of Moses taking himself off up the mountain to wait on God. As we read the Bible, we find that all our stories, whatever their time or place, carry the imprint of God's purpose, God's call to us and, in Jesus especially, the demonstration of God's love and healing grace.

In this particular story of Matthew's, remember that Peter was not called out of the boat, but when he did step out, he was understood and rescued in his failings. His little faith was extraordinary really, and no doubt was greatly strengthened by what happened that night. So too the faith of the rest of the disciples whose eyes were opened and hearts expanded to embrace even more of the miraculous than they had already seen a few hours before.

When we allow our hearts to embrace the inexplicable, we are freed to respond to the unlimited richness that is God's being for us. As we do that, day by day, we may become more attuned to the ways in which God whispers to us, Christ comes to us and the Spirit leads us on. Such is the way, together, the people of God, the Church, may discover new insights into charting a course through the storms that could seem to restrict us and blow us off course. We are reminded of the perils of trying to limit God's infinite mystery, the wonder of which is that it is always reaching out to touch and encourage us.