

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 9th August 2020
9th Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Gracious Father,
revive your Church in our day,
and make her holy, strong and faithful,
for your glory's sake
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Romans 10:5-15

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) 'or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?

'The word is near you,

on your lips and in your heart'

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

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, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Sermon

This morning's readings are all about faith. This might sound obvious – we are in church (or at least attending a church service), after all. But just think for a moment about how often you actually have conversations about your faith. Where is it that you find a safe place to share your faith – the things that you believe and the things that you struggle with? And think, too, about whether this strange time when we haven't been able to attend services in the church building has been difficult. Or have you found out new things about your relationship with God. New ways to pray and worship.

These are some ideas to hold onto as we spend some time inhabiting the gospel reading itself, the familiar story of Jesus walking on the water. I want us to try and explore the story from a variety of different perspectives.

Let's start with Jesus. These past weeks we have been hearing Jesus teaching in parables, spending time with his disciples and other followers to teach them about God's Kingdom. We had the parables of the sower and the wheat and tares, both of which Jesus explained carefully to his disciples. Then the Kingdom parables, describing the Kingdom as a mustard seed; yeast; a pearl of great price; and treasure in a field. And then, last week, following the death of John the Baptist, the 5000 were fed.

Do you remember that at the start of last week's reading, just before Jesus fed the crowd, he had gone out onto the lake for a bit of peace and quiet. It's hardly surprising. If you think about the activity he had been involved in, curing, healing and teaching, he must have been exhausted. And hearing the news of John the Baptist would surely have tipped him over the edge. He needed time to himself, and time with God the father.

Yet it wasn't to be. The crowds pursued him on foot from the towns, and so Jesus came ashore, knowing that he still had work to do. I spoke last week about that balance we all have to work out between spending time with God, and spending time with people. It's a balance we see Jesus constantly working out. And in this morning's reading, he really does need a break. He dismisses the crowd; sends the disciples away; and heads up a mountain.

I have to confess to being a big fan of mountains. They are definitely a place where I feel close to God. And in fact the climb is all part of the prayer, because that is the time when my head can freewheel a bit, trying to make sense of all the things that are on my mind, so that when I reach the summit, I find myself able to just be in God's presence. We don't exactly know what it was like for Jesus, because the gospel writer is interested only in the fact that he went up the mountain to pray. But we know that this time of prayer will have been spent in the presence of his father. And from what follows, we can assume that it was a time of nourishment and replenishment.

We hear that as evening falls, Jesus is alone, and the boat is being battered by the waves. By early morning, Jesus has descended from the mountain, and is walking towards the disciples on the water. Their response is fear, thinking they are seeing a ghost, but he assures them that they need not be afraid. It is Peter who seeks proof, and Jesus is there to catch him as his faith fails him. And when Jesus gets into the boat, the wind dies down, and all is calm. Jesus's presence in the boat apparently brings reassurance.

Let's turn our attention to the disciples. At the beginning of the story, they must have been pretty perplexed. After all, they have just watched Jesus feed 5000 people from just five loaves and two

fish. And then, finally, Jesus asks them to go ahead of him to the other side of the lake, and dismisses the crowd.

I wonder what they were talking about on that boat. Jesus has been teaching them for some time. They have asked him to explain various parables, and he has done so. Yet they know that they don't always understand. Perhaps they talk about what they have just seen, with 5000 people fed. I wonder what they made of it, what explanations they were sharing with one another. Were they still buzzing with the excitement of it all, or were they keen to have Jesus with them so that they could ask for his explanation.

Maybe they also talked about Jesus, understanding his need for rest. After all, when they had suggested that he send the crowd away, they might have been looking out for him, knowing that he must need some time to himself, and some time with God. He chose differently to begin with, but finally did dismiss the crowd, and sent the disciples away, too. Perhaps they were hoping Jesus would take it easy.

And then, of course, the wind came, and the boat was battered by the waves. There were fishermen among the disciples, so they were probably used to bad weather conditions. We certainly don't hear that they were afraid. What does terrify them is seeing Jesus walking towards them on the water, not least because they're not sure whether it's him or a ghost. It's Peter who acts, with his usual impetuosity, and I wonder what the other disciples made of his response. Were they amazed as he took his first steps onto the water, or secretly pleased when he started to sink? We can probably identify with either response. And once Jesus got into the boat, calm was restored.

Now that we've spent some time exploring the story from different perspectives, I wonder where it is that we find ourselves. I said that it's a story of faith. We encounter the depth of Jesus's faith. His need for connection with his father. His refusal to leave anyone alone in their hour of need. And we see, too, the faith and doubt of the disciples. Something that we probably find it quite easy to relate to, one way and another.

It is a story of turbulence – of the winds and waves that buffet us and threaten to knock us off course. I imagine we can all think of those times in our own lives. Perhaps even quite recently. And it is a story of what it is that holds us firm. Of what it is that brings calm amid the storm. Of who it is that will never leave us alone in the face of trouble, challenge and adversity.

Faith is not easy – just look at the disciples, and they spent time with Jesus when he was here on earth. And neither is it a promise that there will be no storms or turbulence.

But there is a promise. It is a promise that we will never be alone, no matter how hard life feels. It is a promise that whatever storms we find ourselves in, we are held firm by God's love. And, as St. Paul reminds us, that is good news for us all. Good news that we should long to share.

Amen