

Walking on water

10 8 14

Almighty Lord and everlasting God
we beseech you to direct, sanctify and govern
both our hearts and bodies
in the ways of your laws
and the works of your commandments;
that through your most mighty protection, both here and ever,
we may be preserved in body and soul.

Our text this morning may be found in today's gospel and is Matthew 14 v 25

'And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake.'

Do you think that Peter could swim ? Logically, the answer should be yes. After all he was a fisherman by trade and lived by the Sea of Galilee. He had both motive and opportunity. But I do remember once hearing that in the old days some sailors did not learn to swim since a quick death was preferable to a lingering one were they to fall overboard. If Peter couldn't swim, then stepping out of the boat onto the water required even more courage and faith on his part.

All four gospels have an account of the feeding of the five thousand. Mark and Matthew have an account of Jesus walking on the water some hours later. Matthew alone has the snippet about Peter's attempt to do the same.

The miracle of the five loaves and two fish being sufficient to feed so many is an eye-opener. The notion of God feeding his people is a deeply-rooted idea in Judaism and is reflected in the prayer Jesus taught us - 'Give us this day our daily bread.' (Matthew 6 v11) The manna in the wilderness is one example of God's providence to the Children of Israel. (Exodus 16) Saying grace before we eat a meal is another sign of our thankfulness of God's provision of food. One of the great I am statements Jesus makes in John's gospel is that 'I am the bread of life'. (6 v48) The problem came for Jesus when the crowd wanted to make him their king there and then - who wouldn't if they'd never go hungry again !

So Jesus sends his disciples back across the lake by boat, dismisses the crowd and then goes off alone to pray. Cue for another miracle over nature. It's early morning; the wind still blowing strong so the boat with the disciples in it is making little headway. From the boat, the disciples see Jesus coming towards them, walking on the water. And they think he's a ghost and panic ! But he calls to them, reassuring them and then Peter responds in an extraordinary way. He calls to Jesus, asking Jesus to tell him to step out onto the water too. He does and he does and all is well till Peter takes his eye off Jesus, distracted by the force of the wind and at that moment, he sinks and is on the point of drowning when Jesus stretches out his hand and gets him back into the boat.

It's a great story but is it true ? There is a sculpture in wood in Peterborough Cathedral which depicts a youthful Peter easing himself out of the boat into the water. If my memory's correct, it captures the moment when his body is outside the boat, his feet in the water but with his back still against the wood and his

hands still holding onto the side of the boat – an example of heroic faith so much in character with the Peter we know and I love. The challenge for us, as for the disciples present who witnessed it, is what happens contradicts the laws of nature – I once joked on the beach at Dinard that I can walk in the water if not on it. So if it happened, Jesus is showing that he is more than he might seem to be at first sight: that the man who made five loaves and two fish sufficient to feed a crowd was also capable of defying gravity.

For those who want to remove or minimise the supernatural from our Bible, the account is a fairy tale – the meaning lying in the underlying truth of the story. For those who are comfortable with the seemingly impossible, the story has the bonus of not only its teaching but its veracity. Whatever you chose to believe, the point of the miracle of Jesus and Peter walking on the water is a confirmation of who Jesus is – safe in the boat, the disciples say to him **‘Truly you are the Son of God.’**

As such what we have here is an epiphany, a revelation, a manifestation of the truth about Jesus. Peter dared to step out onto the water. Do we dare to believe that Jesus is the Son of God our Saviour ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
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