

CHESTER CATHEDRAL Canon Chris Humphries

7.8.11 7th Sunday after Trinity

Trusting God in the storms of life

Matthew 14 v22 – 33 Jesus walks on water

Here's the first verse of an old hymn that, to my knowledge, hasn't yet featured in our cathedral hymn lists:

SING

“Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,
When the clouds unfold their wings of strife?
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,
Will your anchor drift, or firm remain?”

It's a hymn well-known to me from my time as a Vicar on the Yorkshire coast. In the seaside town of Filey it was known as the Filey fishermen's hymn.

“Will your anchor hold in the storms of life?”

Whenever I hear it, the sound of the maroons going up comes back to me, small rocket flares that would boom out across the town calling the lifeboat crew to man the lifeboat to render help and assistance to those in peril and danger at sea.

Without doubt, passages like today's Gospel reading become very vivid when the sea is close at hand.

Jesus, walking on water, not in the peaceful waters of a calm, flat sea, but in the teeth of a violent storm.

Fishing communities everywhere know about the sheer power of wild waters and waves, driven by fierce unrelenting winds. Around our coasts fishing at sea today can still be perilous, but just imagine the risks for crews in days gone by when they had no engines to rely on, just their sailing knowledge, experience and skill to enable them to steer for the shore.

Even when home was in sight the dangers were not over, for in a rough sea the waves can be fearsome close in to the shore. Many Filey fishermen were drowned trying to make a safe landing, within sight of their families and loved ones.

Imagine then the little boat on the sea of Galilee, battered by the waves. Exposed, and at the mercy of the elements. For a moment, hold that picture in your minds.

PAUSE

Storms are a powerful image and motif when we think about things that threaten, disturb and unsettle us. What storms shall we consider in our lives today?

In our intercessions we have been remembering those engulfed by the storms of violence and war, those overtaken by famine and hunger. A bit closer to home is the turbulence of the world's financial markets and the uncertainties of today's economic climate, because these affect the day to day circumstances, job prospects, savings and pensions of ourselves, our families and friends. But those who really know what it is to feel battered by the winds and waves of life will be those whose lives have been turned upside down by sudden change – a breakdown of a relationship, the loss of a job, personal sickness and ill-health, or the death of a loved one. These come to us all at some point, and the first questioning line of the old hymn then seems very relevant indeed “Will your anchor hold? Will your anchor hold?”

Walking on Water. The phrase is used sometimes today. But when we read of Jesus walking on water we will need to put on one side the way the phrase is used these days to speak of amazing feats, often in sport – Wayne Rooney, Andy Murray or Stuart Broad walk on water – in sporting terms we build up our stars as demi-gods who cannot fail. But the phrase has come into the English language from this strange, almost eerie Bible passage from St Matthew's gospel.

To set the scene: Jesus had been teaching the crowds on the hillsides of Galilee in Northern Israel, and had just fed a crowd of 5,000. This had made such an impact that many wanted to make Jesus King, and some had in mind that he be leader of an instant Jewish people's army to drive out the occupying Roman forces.

But Jesus knew that his kingship, his whole mission, was not to be like that, and he took himself off into the hills to pray while sending Peter and his disciples across the sea of Galilee by boat to wait for him on the other side.

Now this unique inland freshwater lake or sea is famous for its sudden squalls, and during the night it seems that Jesus, coming down from the hills and making his way round the top of the lake to meet his friends, sees their boat desperately struggling to make any headway against the powerful wind.

What follows sounds puzzling and full of mystery to our sophisticated 21st century ears, but the lessons are clear.

First, if the wind and the sea are powerful, then the power of the Lord is much greater.

Echoes of psalm 46 “God is our refuge and strength. We will not fear though the earth be shaken, even if the seas roar and rage.”

By and large Israel was not a nation of seafarers. Their culture and their writings spoke of the sea in terms of terror and chaos. Yet here, Jesus comes to his disciples as a one-man rescue team – no lifeboat, not even a life-jacket – what on earth was going on when, in the early hours of the morning, he came towards the boat, walking on the water.

Now, many of those in the boat had been fishing for years, these were not gullible men. They knew that what they were seeing was out of the ordinary, to put it mildly. So at first they scream with fear, taking the figure of Jesus to be a ghost. Then, later on, when Jesus has rescued Peter, had boarded the vessel and the tempest had died down they worshipped Jesus. “Truly” they said “You are the Son of God”

PAUSE

Might it be that the comforts of this consumer age cloud our vision? Are our spiritual senses dulled by the things we busy ourselves with, so that we don't notice the presence of God among us?

Do we hold God at arm's length, thinking that we don't really need him? Those who testify to the power of God to help and to save have often come through crises and storms in their lives, have cried out in their need, and have found strength and shelter, new meaning and purpose – there are those in this cathedral this morning who know it has been so for them. If the storm is great, if our troubles are great, then the Lord is greater than our troubles. That alone is a well-tested truth that we can rely on and take with us from this service.

But here is a second lesson, a second truth. Our calling as Christians is about God's grace and never about our own goodness or gifts.

Think of dear St Peter. If you want a heroic saint in the classic mould, brave and courageous, you would go for St. George or Joan of Arc. But the great thing about Peter is that he's so obviously an ordinary human being, we can relate to him.

So when he sees Jesus walking on the water he acts on impulse, led by his heart, literally feet first. “Lord, if its really you on the water, order me to come out to you.” It does seem that he trusts Jesus more than the others, that his faith initially is strong, but when he steps out of the boat and is face to face with the raging sea then his courage fails and he starts to sink. He cries out “Save me, Lord”

The frailty of Peter, Rock of the Church, is there for all to see, and its been a great encouragement for ordinary Christian folk ever since that Peter's faith and trust in Jesus was born out of an awareness and

recognition of his own need. The frailty and fallibility of Peter is seen many times in the gospels, at Ceasarea Phillipi misunderstanding the need for Jesus to suffer and die, sleeping on watch in the garden of Gethsemane, denying Jesus persistently in the courtyard of the High Priest. But the key is this: God still chose him. By God's grace, ordinary Peter was special, and within God's purposes, we, his saints today, are special too.

When Peter confessed his failings or cried out for help, God picked him up, sorted him out, and equipped him for the task he had in mind. And in the years after the resurrection Peter was to face all sorts of turbulence, storms of many kinds within the life of the early church.

In contrast to the many letter of St Paul, only 2 brief letters of Peter are found in our bibles. Here's a short extract from I Peter chapter 1 and verse 3

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

These are inspiring, uplifting words from this fragile, flesh and blood disciple who by God's grace had become a great spiritual leader with a burning desire to share the message that all can know the Saviour that he knew so well; the Saviour who, when Peter had floundered and started to go under, had grasped him firmly and seen him safely on board.

The verse of the old fishermen's hymn I quoted took the form of a question:

SING (LOW) “Will your anchor hold in the storms of life?”

Each of us knows the past or present reality of the storms that can overtake us in this life. The refrain of the hymn is not a question, but a wonderful affirmation:

“We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,
Fastened to the rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love.”

(Priscilla Owens 1829-99)

Our Saviour and steersman, our shelter and strength, the one who mysteriously walks on water. Yes, whether storms come upon us outside or inside, God is always greater than our troubles.

