

Sermon for 9th August 2026, Year A, Pentecost 11, Proper 14

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Matthew 14:22-33

Sermon

Things are hectic for Jesus and the disciples, and they've been hectic for a while. In just half a chapter, Jesus has been rejected by his hometown of Nazareth, he's heard that his cousin John the Baptist has been beheaded by Herod, and even while trying to get away for some peace and quiet he's pursued by thousands of people begging for miracles of healing and food. Now, after sending his disciples away by boat, and dismissing the crowds after the feeding of the five thousand, he finally gets some time to himself, to go up the mountain to pray. We don't know what he prayed; all we know is that he was there alone, on a mountain, one of those places which in antiquity was considered a 'thin place', where there might be easier contact between heaven and earth. Things are turbulent for Jesus, and overwhelmingly busy, but that just means prayer is all the more necessary.

This sudden separation of distance between Jesus and his disciples immediately gives us a sharp contrast between their circumstances. Jesus is away up a hill, and the disciples are together in their boat – and several of them are competent sailors don't forget – but they soon find themselves in the middle of another unexpected storm, and without Jesus asleep in the boat to wake up and save them.

Once more, the disciples have been forced way outside their comfort zone, and we're left to wonder whether this is by Jesus's intent, or by circumstance. Have they learned from their experience with the five loaves and two fishes to trust in God rather than panic when their own capacities are exceeded? It appears

not. But, to be fair, it's perhaps not so much the storm that terrifies them this time, as the sight of Jesus walking on water, when they are so far out from land.

In Hebrew thought, vast bodies of water were not just physical realities, like earth, trees, or mountains. The seas, with their impossible depths and uncontrollable raging torrents, were considered the embodiment of chaos, the default state whenever and wherever God's creative power is absent. In the first chapter of Genesis, the Spirit of God hovers over the waters, which exist as a sort of default canvas before God speaks a Word and creation begins.

So, when Jesus walks across the sea through the storm, utterly unaffected by it, this isn't just a miracle of control over the weather – it's not even just a miracle of walking where there should have been sinking or swimming – it's actually a demonstration of Jesus wielding a divine power and authority previously only associated with God himself. Only God has the power to subdue the chaos of the sea.

The disciples still can't quite believe their eyes. They had left Jesus to go up the mountain to pray alone. No wonder their first suspicion is that this must be a ghost – a deceiving spirit – come to trick them like a sea siren tempting them to their deaths.

The way Jesus greets them, however, could not be more emphatic as a statement both of his divinity, and his identification with God. "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid," he says. It is fundamentally characteristic of all God's communication with his beloved human children, whether directly in prayer, or via an angel, or through the Son of Man himself, that his first words are almost always ones of reassurance. "Take heart. Do not be afraid." But Jesus also adds the words, "It is I," which in the Greek is "*ego eimi*," the same words used in the Greek translation of the book of Exodus to translate the name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. When Moses asks God his name, God says, "My

name is I AM. *Ego Eimi*.” In this profound moment, Jesus is identifying himself with the “I AM” – the creator of the world and the victor over all fear and chaos.

The disciples, however, are still not sure. Jesus hasn’t come in a way that they can recognise or expect. And it’s only in Matthew’s version of the Gospel that any of them has the slightest courage to even test the notion. “Lord, if it is you...” Peter hesitantly begins, echoing the sort of prayer we all utter when we can’t quite believe that God might be speaking to us personally and asking us to ignore our fear and step out in faith. “Come,” says Jesus, and Peter, being wonderfully impulsive and relatively immune to thinking about the consequences of his actions, steps out at once onto the sea.

What a wonderful image of encouragement when we as Christians feel scared and challenged by the calling on our lives to be salt and light in the world, to be examples of goodness and compassion and mercy and self-sacrifice and justice for the oppressed, to continue to proclaim Jesus Christ to a world that has completely lost interest in empathy and humility. “Come,” says Jesus. “Do not be afraid.” Step out of your comfort zone. Trust that I am who I say I am.

At first, it all goes so well. Peter walks on water. He is sharing in God’s power over everything that could ever harm him. He moves towards Jesus, exultant. We perhaps hear a choir of angels singing a rousing chorus of Alleluias. But then Peter notices the reality around him – the strong winds, and presumably the waves, and he remembers that this is all impossible. His childlike trust evaporates, and he begins to sink.

Most if not all of us have probably been there. We hear God’s call to take a risk, and we take that first tentative step, and for a moment everything seems wonderful, and then we realise we’re doing something impossible, and we panic and flail about, and reach out desperately for safety. And suddenly Jesus is there, holding us firm. He hasn’t abandoned us or let us go. Our faith was not enough, but Jesus saved us anyway.

Some theologians have seen, in Peter's sinking and being raised up, a sort of baptism – an acknowledgement of our own weakness, a return to trusting in God's strength to meet our needs, and God's forgiveness, lifting us up from our fear and failure once again.

“Oh, you of little faith,” Jesus says as we climb together back into the boat, and the violent wind falls calm. We don't know if Jesus is saying this with a frustrated frown, or with a gentle amused smile. To be accused of having 'little faith' does sound like a criticism. Surely, we should be aspiring to 'big faith,' especially those of us who've been coming to church and praying for decades. But in just three chapters' time, Jesus reminds us that if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we will say to a mountain 'move from here to there' and it will move. So, maybe a little faith is not so bad after all. Peter had only a little faith, but he dared to get out of the boat and trust that he could walk on water, and in this case, despite his limitations, his little faith was enough to transform all the disciples from fear into confident joy and worship. “Truly,” they all declared, “You are the Son of God.”