

## LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY AUGUST 13<sup>th</sup>

**Reading: Matthew 14: 22 – 33 [Ninth (9) after Pentecost]**

Just as with the feeding of the five thousand with loaves and fish in last week's reading, again we are presented with a story whose meanings lie at hidden depths and rely on previous associations. At the purely physical and tangible level, this is surely a miracle which defies the natural order. But in the hope and living of an early faith community it has other messages.

Again too, we are confronted with a story in Matthew's Gospel which has happened before. There has already been a stilling of the storm on the lake in Matthew chapter 8. As we saw last week, combined with the editorial 'glosses' that Matthew gives this account, we are likely tapping into an important tradition of the early church.

Perhaps key in unlocking this account's significance is the strange detail that Jesus dismissing the crowds, and with them, his own disciples. Jesus '*makes*' them get into the boat [the verb form is an order – other translations render this Jesus 'compelled' or 'constrained' the disciples]. Why? Jesus, their loving leader, who promises God's presence, is alone. The story places the disciples – and through them, the early Christian community - apart from Jesus. It is an unprecedented moment in the life of Jesus' early followers.

The ancient people of Israel were never a sea-faring population, They left that to the Philistines. In the ancient imagination the sea was a place of unknown terrors, of threatening powers. As the feeding of the crowds employed imagery from ancient stories of the people of God, so again does this. In his "First Thoughts on the Gospel Passages from the Lectionary", Biblical scholar Bill Loader points out that "*The story recalls images of Yahweh walking over the waters in the Psalms and Job (Ps 77:19; Job 9:8). Most of the nature miracles - and a number of others besides - have been shaped by Old Testament images. The stilling of the storm is shaped by the affirmation in the Psalms that Yahweh rebuked and calmed the seas (Ps 106:9; 65:7; 89:9; 107:25-32)*"

So the disciples face the terrors of the sea, and a night time, with Jesus not in the boat with them. Eugene Boring in the New Interpreters' Commentary on Matthew says, "*to the biblical mind, being on the sea is itself a threat, representing all the anxieties and dark powers that threaten the goodness of the created order*" [page 327]. Matthew is particular in telling us that their fears were at a height '*during the fourth watch*', that is, between 3 and 6 o'clock. And it is right here, right then, when you might least be able to still hope for it, that Jesus comes to them. Perhaps the most important words of this account, the words of faith, are "*Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid.*"

A boat at sea was a common picture for the early church. Here then, we have storm-tossed boat, as Boring says, "*symbolic of the church's stormy missionary journey through history*" [New Interpreter's Commentary, Matthew, page 327]. And their Lord, the presence of God, is not with them! Further, Matthew describes the buffeting of the boat by the winds as *basanizo*, '*torture*'. But in the midst of their fears and panic, Jesus comes to them, defeating all the threats above and within the waters. This is more than an incident on the lake!

The ensuing dialogue between Peter and Jesus is a Matthaean addition; it does not appear in Mark's record of this encounter. Peter is often commended in this Gospel encounter for his impetuous faith, trusting Jesus enough to want to walk to him on the seas. It was an endeavour in which we know Peter failed – and with great consequence! But Eugene M Boring points out that this is not the story's intent: "*For Matthew, Peter's problem was not that he took his eyes off Jesus, but that he wanted proof of the presence of Christ, and so left the boat in the first place*" [Matthew, page 328]. Peter, and through him, the disciples 'doubts'

is not unbelief, but *distazo*, vacillation. There is a call in the language of this account to trust in God, even against the seeming appearances of nature.

These Gospel miracle stories can readily ‘plunge’ us into debates about the supernatural and limits to rationality. We need to set the miracle nature of the account alongside its meaning. For the first century mind, the miraculous was accepted. Indeed, Boring (above) makes the comment that “*whereas the modern mind thinks of defying the law of gravity, the biblical mind thinks of the one who overcomes the power of chaos*” [Commentary *Matthew*, page 328]. Notable too, that people in Jesus’ world give credit to his miracle powers but still do not follow or ‘believe’. Similarly, people reading today might reach non-supernatural conclusions about ‘what really happened’ and find it no barrier to their response of faith in Jesus. It is important here that the nexus between belief in miracles and Christian faith be broken. They are not of the same scale. Any story will contain factual and edible elements and superlatives, almost unbelievable parts. This is as true for a tale of an old uncle told in family histories as it is for a child’s bed-time reader.

This is not a tale of “faith will overcome these things”, of faith lifting us out of challenging circumstances. Nor even of faith identified, in Boring’s apt words, “*with spectacular exceptions to the warp and woof of our ordinary days, days that are all subject to the laws of physics and biology* [Commentary, page 329]. Rather, it is the assurance that God, even though we be apart from him, comes to us in our time of need. As Eugene Boring comments, “*little faith is the dialectical mixture of courage and anxiety, of hearing the word of the Lord and looking at the terror of the storm, of trust and doubt, which is always an ingredient of Christian existence.*”

Maybe the ‘faith’ spoken of here, great faith, is not the power to overcome, but is that calm, unheroic, but still impressive conviction that allows you to stay at your place ‘in the boat’, even in the storm, confident that you don’t have to come to Jesus, because you know, in trust, that Jesus will always come to you, bringing forgiveness, peace and calm.

THEMES: God’s presence, trust,