

Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus walks on water, MU service

Matthew's church had problems. That was why he wrote down what he knew about Jesus—to help them.

His church was a mixed bag—many were Jews who had fled from Judea, when the Romans destroyed the temple and its worship and killed many in and around Jerusalem in AD 70. Some had moved to Syria earlier, to get away from Jerusalem, where they were being given a hard time by those who rejected Jesus. Others were not Jewish but had been attracted to the community by its message of love and forgiveness—they could get close to Israel's God without being Jewish. More than that they were part of a new community of God's people made up of both Jews and others.

it was “a community cut off from its roots.....divided in itself as to what its priorities should be, groping for direction in the face of previously-unknown problems”

The church in England has its problems a few years ago I tried an experiment. I asked all those under 50 to stand up—only half a dozen of us did, and of those one was a family visiting their grandmother for the day. Under 60 got us to about 15%, under 70 to about 30% standing—under 80 took us just over half standing. We can also feel under attack from outside—the media can be quite hostile assuming we believe things that only a few Christians do believe.

Our sisters and brothers in Zimbabwe with whom we are linked have big problems too—the economy, the impact of corona virus, the challenge of young people leaving to find work, if they can find it at all.

So we are not dissimilar from Matthew's church in some ways—we have problems and can feel overwhelmed by them at times.

Matthew made sure he included the incident in today's reading for his church with its problems. As we overhear what he wrote for them, can we find some comfort in our own situations.

Matthew remembers. He remembers a long day, when Jesus was teaching at length. At the end of it he had been amazing, feeding all those people with just a little food. Small resources given willingly to Jesus service, made a huge difference.

But instead of staying so that they could bask in the glory of the even Jesus made his followers get into the boat and cross the lake, while he dealt with the crowds and prayed. And prayed, and prayed.

It was a tough night's work. As they rowed the wind had got up. In Galilee, the wind from the sea coast can be funnelled through the East –West valleys and quickly stir up the waters to vast waves. Tough to row in, tough to survive in. What should have taken a couple of hours became an all night survival struggle. In the middle of it, exhausted and frustrated they see someone coming towards them. It 's impossible that this is someone alive—it's a storm, it's water, so it must be a ghost, come to claim them for the dead. They do what we all would do—they panicked.

Then they have an even bigger shock, they hear Jesus speak. This is Jesus, their friends, their teacher, who they'd grown up with, he is a great teacher, sent from God, but what is he doing walking on the lake out there. And what is he saying.

By walking on water Jesus is enacting language of God, so In Job 9:8 we read 'who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea', when Job is speaking of God. Similarly in Psalm 77:19 Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen.

In Isaiah 43 God says But now, this is what the LORD says—
he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel:
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned;

the flames will not set you ablaze. ³ For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;

So when Jesus says 'Do not fear, I am', which is the best translation of the Greek, together with his action in walking to them, he is not just being a miracle worker, he is showing in word and action that he is God. God who walks across the waves, God who says to his people do not fear, God who revealed himself to Moses with the words 'I am'.

So for Matthew's community and for ours, the comfort of this passage is the same. The storms are there and are real—we don't gain anything by denying them, and we do well to row as well as we can in the middle of them. But we do well to look for Jesus, as God coming to us in the middle of them, with his words of peace. 'Do not fear, when you pass through the waters, they will not overwhelm you' is a good verse for us today. Jesus can still do great things with a little willingly offered, he can still enable us to do those great things with him—all we need to do is to keep on looking to him, and keep on trusting.

Today we remember Mary Sumner, who in the troubles of her day set up the Mothers Union. It was a group to encourage women to come close to God and from there to reach out to help others. Today it is still helping people to come close to God and to help others. Here in Southwark:

And in Zimbabwe: