

The Church's prayer for this Sunday - The ninth Sunday after Trinity

Gracious Father,
revive your Church in our day,
and make her holy, strong and faithful,
for your glory's sake
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 9th August 2020, The ninth Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 85: 8-13

⁸ Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

⁹ Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

¹² The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

¹³ Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen

Today's reading from the Old Testament: 1 Kings 19: 9-18

In this story from the book of 1 Kings, Elijah, the prophet of the Lord, has just completed a significant and challenging role in a great demonstration of God's power against the prophets of the false god Baal. We find him exhausted and fleeing from those who, as a consequence, are now demanding his life.

⁹ At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' ¹⁰ He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have

forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

Elijah Meets God at Horeb

¹¹ He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' ¹⁴ He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' ¹⁵ Then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.'

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today's reading from the gospels: Matthew 14: 22-33

This story immediately follows the miraculous feeding of the 5000 on the shore of the lake.

Jesus Walks on the Water

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land,^[a] for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

²⁸ Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' ²⁹ He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind,^[b] he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A reflection for the ninth Sunday after Trinity from Revd Paul Garnell, Team Curate and interim lead minister for Coton



A painting by Gustave Brion: Jesus, and Peter on the Water, 1863.

+In the name of the living God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen+

'Jesus' our harbour in the tempest...

The Gospel this morning opens with Jesus requesting the disciples to go on ahead without him whilst he dismisses the crowds, followed by him heading up the mountain for a much needed mini break. If we assume he dismisses the, now well-fed, five thousand and his weary disciples sometime before the arrival of dusk, and walks out on a turbulent sea to find their boat at dawn, he was there about 12 hours. Enough time to recuperate from the demands of the crowd, rest his body and mind, and to talk quietly with his Father. After all, the writing was on the wall, he was going to be ministering to massive crowds for the foreseeable future, people demanding he offer them or others healing and his wisdom, whilst the authorities find an excuse to silence him permanently.

For anyone feeling overwhelmed by people's expectations of them, the demands of work or family, or anticipating a long period of either or both, cutting yourself off for a few hours, or days, without means of getting back to family, friends or colleagues is not just a good thing, it is a vital necessity. It rejuvenates and energises and sometimes expands our future capabilities, or perhaps more often, makes us more realistic about what those capabilities are. A lesson I am slowly learning!

What about the disciples in this story? The disciples have been pushed off in a boat onto choppy seas, to fend for themselves - something they are far more capable of coping with, especially given the number of fishermen on board. They are used to the unpredictable weather on the Sea of Galilee. And if we think back to Chapter 8 of Matthew's gospel, you will recall a similar situation, where Jesus is with the disciples in the boat asleep and called upon to help. On this occasion they are confronted with an unexpected sight, that of Jesus walking towards them through the dawn light. "A ghost!" Their fear and superstitions take over. Dawn light and fatigue can play tricks on the eyes and they had perhaps been awake for a considerable part of the night maintaining the boat's progress, or at least stability, in a headwind. We should not be surprised at the shouts of horror at the ghostly image walking toward them.

Peter did not have twelve hours of retreat, rest, and restorative prayer behind him when he followed Jesus' command to come out of the boat. As a fisherman and natural leader, in the boat with his colleagues he had probably been playing to his strengths, using his God-given well-honed skills to keep them all afloat. But many fishermen are not confident swimmers, and the ability to walk on water is not a known attribute of any human, so when the reality of the situation he's just walked into, or onto, really kicks in, no amount of divine guidance and support from his master can override that overwhelming sinking feeling.

When Jesus accuses Peter of having little faith, there could in fact be a couple of teaching points. Many of us know the most obvious; Peter had only stepped out of the boat with Jesus' encouragement. He, and we, need to realise that when we metaphorically do this, we need to keep our focus very firmly fixed on Jesus, if we dare to go it alone when a storm surrounds us. But it may be that he's only supporting us in this so that we don't drown, and are therefore both still alive and better equipped in the future to focus on what it is we are actually called to attempt and achieve in our lives.

Sometimes, we have to admit we were wrong to attempt something that was outside our skill set, grasp firmly on to Jesus' forgiving hand, watch our pride sink and, with him, get back in the boat. Jesus will always be there for us in these moments, making sure we aren't lost to the wind and waves, but as we return to the boat, sopping wet and feeling sorry for our rash actions, the important thing is that we are aware of God's presence now on board, just as he always intended it should be. Our God-given skills, combined with his presence in the One that has been sent to us, Jesus Christ our Lord, is what makes for a much calmer journey to the place where his ministry must take centre-stage. Faith may involve seeing the boat for what it is; a shared experience with the opportunity to work collaboratively, waiting for the person God has sent to join the team and lead us into calmer waters.

It is Jesus' job to walk on water, not ours. Jesus is the Son of God, divinely equipped to feed, to heal, to calm troubled waters, to rescue us when we get ourselves into deep water. We, like Peter, have been called to be faithful disciples using our God-given skills, and when equipped by the presence of God through the Holy Spirit (as Peter would be with the rest of the disciples at Pentecost) to undertake difficult tasks, take risks and put ourselves in the way of tricky situations, so that the grace, love and forgiveness offered in and through Jesus, can be brought to people's attention.

Our job as Jesus' disciples, is to reach out and place our hand firmly in Jesus' grasp. In doing so, not only will we have the safety and security of his presence with us, both individually and as a fellowship of Christians, but we will then also discover where he needs us to go, which shore we are called to land on, so that both his divinity and his humanity can be proclaimed in his love for all those who aren't currently in the boat with us.

Amen+

How does Peter speak to your experience as a Christian?