



Revd Ro's Reflection on Tenth Sunday after Trinity

Proper 14

Year A

Romans 10.5-15

Matthew 14.22-33

This week's gospel reading follows directly from last week's. Jesus, having ministered to the crowds and feeding them by the miracle of the five loaves and two fishes, finally dismisses them. That in itself shows his authority. He needs to get away; he needs time to recharge and to pray, to be alone with his Father, so he sends the disciples in the boat across the lake to the western side intending to join them later. We are told that he 'went up the mountain by himself.' The story is told in Matthew, Mark and John but not in Luke. John adds more detail, he states that Jesus realised the crowd wanted to proclaim him as king, and therefore before they could do so, he left them. John also says that the destination is Capernaum. This then is the northern part of the Sea of Galilee.

We must remember that some of the disciples were experienced fishermen; they knew what they were doing in a boat. It is also useful to have some background about the Sea of Galilee. It is prone to sudden violent storms. It is more than six hundred feet below sea level, surrounded by hills and mountains, the rivers cut deep ravines and pour down into the lake. The winds rush down these valleys on to the water. The result is the phenomenon of the sudden storm.

Jesus has already stilled a similar sudden storm in Matthew 8. 23-32. Here the terrified disciples simply cannot control the boat and fear for their lives; they implore Jesus, who is asleep in the boat, to help them. He stills the storm and they marvel, 'Who is this that even the winds and waves obey him?' It is a part of the process of realisation that this is no ordinary teacher. He has control over matter, therefore this is someone who must be of God, their King and Messiah.

This story is very similar, the sudden storm arises and once again the 'boat is battered by the waves'. We are given exact timings. The storm is in the evening, Jesus is not with them. By now the boat is 'far from land because the wind was against them.' Everything here is very precise. Just as with last

week's detail, 'they sat down; there was a great deal of grass in that place.' These details are not incidental; it is the writer rooting the incident in reality.

It is not till early morning that they see Jesus. Some people say he was wading through the foam to help them but we have already been told that the boat is far from land and Matthew says nothing about it coming nearer the shore. Also they would have realised he was wading out to meet them but Matthew is absolutely clear about it. 'He came towards them walking on the lake,' and then there is their reaction. They thought he was an apparition because what they saw was amazing, terrifying.

Immediately Jesus spoke to them, 'Take heart it is I, do not be afraid.' That takes us to the upper room, Luke 24.36:

'While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.'

The storm is still raging around them yet Peter once more shows his love for Jesus and his impetuosity by jumping into the water. But before he does so he addresses Jesus. 'Lord if it is you; command me to come to you on the water.' And Jesus replies, 'Come.' That I think is so important. If this shadowy figure really is his Lord he can come to him in safety. It does show confidence and indeed faith. Well, so far so good, but imagine the scene, huge waves, the boat still tossed about, Jesus stretching out his hand in the early light. Peter, in the midst of all that, loses his confidence, looks around and is terrified and, just like the frail human being that he is, begins to sink. It is another illustration of Peter's character. He really is just like us, full of good intentions, full of faith, 'You are the Messiah son of the living God,' but so often, when it comes to it, fallible. Remember he says to Jesus, 'I will never desert you', then denies him three times.

It is Jesus who reaches out his strong hands to him and saves him here. It is Jesus on the shore after his resurrection who says to him three times, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' thus restoring the broken and guilt ridden Peter. Jesus says to Peter in verse 31, 'You of little faith why did you doubt?' That is reminiscent of that other stilling of the storm,

"Lord, save us! We are perishing!"²⁶ And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm.' (Matthew 8)

The disciples would have known Psalm 65 well enough:

⁶ You still the raging of the seas,
the roaring of their waves
and the clamour of the peoples.

It is God that is spoken of here.

²⁷ 'They were amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?' (Matthew 8)

Well the answer to that is Jesus is the incarnate God, the second person of The Trinity.

As Jesus enters the boat in this gospel account 'the wind ceased.' This is the central point. It is another clear indication to the disciples that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, the fulfilment of God's promise. At the end they say, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Of course, very importantly, the incident speaks to us on a personal level. This story is about faith; it is a challenge to us. We confess Jesus as God but the question is, is our faith in him really strong enough? Peter fails because he loses his confidence and momentarily loses his faith; faith that Jesus can do anything, and therefore so can he so long as he acts in Jesus' strength.

The crux of the matter is Jesus is God, he is with us, and we have that assurance and that promise. We need to have faith that we are never alone and if we walk with him we can be strong in his strength. It is at those times when we feel at rock bottom, when we feel alone, if you like in the storms of our life, that actually Jesus is nearest to us. That is illustrated beautifully in the poem 'Footprints.' Jesus opens his arms wide for us, as he did to Peter, but we have to go towards him in that faith. The trouble is so many things can get in the way. Instead of focusing on Jesus, on our Christianity, we focus on other things. Often we want our own way, rather than Jesus'.

I have said before that the challenge to us is to ask all the time, 'What would Jesus do?' If we honestly follow that and let it really be a guide to our behaviour then we can indeed walk to him, walk in his way. But never for a moment can we be complacent. If we do this, if we walk in our own path doing what we want, taking our eye off Jesus' teaching it is then that we go wrong and metaphorically lose ourselves just as Peter did.

The Romans reading also follows on directly from last week. Paul was mourning the fact that the majority of his people, the Jews, did not see Jesus as the fulfilment of the prophecies, as God's promised Messiah. In verse 5 Paul states, 'Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law.' So Paul is going back into the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament as we know it. It is impossible to understand Paul's argument unless we do that too. I didn't recognise the quotations so I looked them up.

This is Deuteronomy 30.

¹⁰ When you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. ¹¹ Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' ¹⁴ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.'

What Paul is looking back to are the passages in which the Jews are told that God will restore them if they obey his commands and live in his way. They have been slaves, their land will be occupied by foreign powers, and they will taste a bitter exile. But the covenant promise is there, that if only they will stop their wilful and sinful behaviour, stop disobeying God's laws and follow his commands then he will restore them. They must turn from sin and turn to God wholeheartedly.

Paul however interprets this in a new way, he says, 'Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down,) or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead.) But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.'

So Paul says this is exactly the faith that we proclaim. There is no need to search further, Jesus has come to them, and he has been raised from the dead. He continues, 'If you confess on your lips that Jesus is Lord', that was a huge thing to say. We have to remember that Lord was the title of Caesar. The Romans were the latest foreign power to rule over the Jews and only Caesar was to be called Lord. So many of the early Christians would be killed for that very reason, they did call Jesus Lord and not Caesar. There is only one Lord and one God.

This then is the new way, Jesus Christ, God incarnate, has come to humanity but people must turn from sin and turn to Jesus. This is exactly the promise made at a baptism service. The making of a new Christian marked with Jesus' cross. 'I turn from sin and turn to Christ.'

Paul continues, 'and believe in your hearts that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.' If you believe in Jesus as Lord, and act on that and live in Jesus' way you will receive salvation. Indeed Christ died and rose again to win that salvation for us.

Paul makes the point very clearly, that salvation is not just for Jews it is for everyone who believes in Jesus. It is a wonderful promise. 'There is no distinction between Jew and Greek,' means there is no distinction full stop. If we confess Jesus as Lord and try to live in his way then we are loved equally and become children of God. That is freeing for all humanity, with God there is no exception and no status! We are all children of a loving heavenly Father and co-heirs with Christ.

There follows the passage from verse 14 that is clearly about mission, and is often quoted in that context. 'How can they hear of him without someone to proclaim him?' That is what Paul and his fellow Christians were called to do, to spread the good news of Jesus to the world. We are all called to witness to Jesus as Lord and that takes us back to, 'The word is near to you on your lips and in your heart.' So it is not just what we say that matters but what is in our heart, or to put in another way, what we do.

Both passages show Jesus as so near to us, we have only to call on him and he holds out his hands to sustain and strengthen us. At the times in our lives when things go wrong when we feel we are walking on shifting sands and nothing is certain, the one thing that is certain in every situation is that God loves us and is near us to strengthen and to guide us. We have only to reach out to him in faith and as with Peter on the lake and he will strengthen us and lift us up.

Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water; put your hand in the hand of the man who calmed the sea. Donny Hathaway

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