

Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost. 13 August, 2017. Stepping out is scary

Walk with me into the gospel reading (Matthew 14:22-36). Step into the sandals of Peter. Be Peter, at least for a little while. Imagine. Close your eyes and feel yourself into being him. Imagine. You have just witnessed an amazing sight. Up there on that hillside near the lake. The crowd were gathered. Something amazing happened with loaves and fish. Generosity overcame selfishness. Simple sharing opened up delightful opportunities. Barriers of prejudice tumbled. The hungry were fed. So much extra food was left over! That all happened and now the journey with Jesus continues.

Down to the lakeside you walk. You and Jesus' other closest friends. All still awestruck. All still smiling. All still reeling with wonder and questions and thoughts which take you beyond where you have imagined. You, Peter, are there. A leader in that group of disciples. One to whom others look. One who has been thrust into a prominent position. You have been placed there even beyond your own level of comfort and confidence.

Jesus tells you to get into the boat. This you can handle. You take charge. Boats are your place, part of your comfort zone. You organise the group and settle in. Then, He tells you to go ahead. He will join you. But He tells you to go ahead of him. That unsettles you. Some of your confidence ebbs away. But you try not to show the others. You set out.

Feel the movement of the boat as the wind catches the sails. The solid wood, worn smooth by years of work. Under your hand you feel the vibrations of the boat moving across the deep dark waters. You hear the lapping of the waves and the creaking of the sail and mast and the quiet murmurings of the others in the group.

Into the darkness the boat sails on. Night wraps like a cloak around you all, and a blanket of solid cloud obscures the stars. With a suddenness all too familiar to those who know this lake, a storm arises. Murmurings among those more accustomed to walking on solid ground turn to disturbed words of panic and fear. The storm rages around. The storm rages inside you and inside the others on board.

Battling to cross this dangerous lake is stretching you. It wasn't where you expected to be. It wasn't what you thought you would be doing this night. But here you are. In a storm. And there are others relying on you.

How are you feeling? There is fear around you. There is fear inside. Yes, you have been through this before. But are you also wondering why it is that you are facing this with a sense of being alone? Is there a feeling of being abandoned? Jesus sent you off on this journey and it has become far harder than you expected. How are you feeling? Out of the boat is scarier than staying in, so the journey continues. Here you are. There is nowhere else to be.

What else swirls in your mind? Is there a sense of responsibility for the others who are sharing this journey? You are a fisherman, you know these waters, this is your place. The others with you are not all used to being on the water. You see their terror and feel the weight of responsibility. You hold together even though you may not want to. And still the storm rages. Inside and out.

Then. Across the water. A spectral figure appears. An apparition, a presence even more scary than the sense of absence. Who is it? What is it? Someone mentions a ghost. What are you thinking?

The voice comes and your response is ... courage? Bravado? The words which you utter sound so brave yet are filled with fear. In a moment of confidence you step out towards the one who you think you know and who you think knows you. You step out. And then you make the mistake of looking down. Instead of keeping your eyes on the one who is there for you ... you notice the things which seem to threaten you, and you begin to slip and sink and become overwhelmed.

A hand reaches you. A hand. His hand. He is there. Somehow. He is there. And what seemed impossible is transformed. The journey, the trusting, even the stumbling. All are transformed. Words of comfort. Presence. Companionship. And the journey continues.

This story about crossing the lake is a little bit of intriguing narrative, and so much more. It has been described as a story told by the early church, remembering some experience but seeing it through the window of their experience after the resurrection, after the ascension, after they had been cast out onto the journey beyond.

Setting out ON the boat can be scary. Being the church always has a mix of delight and fear, comfort and challenge, confidence, stability, certainty and also the deep risk that we may be taken to places beyond our imagining. Even more. Leaving the boat and stepping forward on the journey into a place which is uncertain takes more courage. The boat seems a hard place. What about when we are called to take a step into something even more exciting?! It takes a lot of trust to get out of the boat. Leaving the familiar doesn't mean abandoning the journey. It means continuing it in a different way, still accompanied, perhaps even more closely accompanied than in the secure place.

The early church knew what it was like to set out into places and times of uncertainty. So do we. Now. Here. The storm rages around. And within. That echoes in us as a community. It resonates in us as individuals, seeking a faithful, meaningful way forward. Life for us and as a church is not what it has been in the past. We cannot go back. We can only go forward.

What will help at times of uncertainty? Individually and communally? What helps? Easy answers don't do it. Staying in the boat, the familiar place and way of being and operating wont always work either. Huddling down and pulling the covers or the fishing nets over us is no assurance of security.

Imaginative engagement. Finding the courage to step out into the places we are invited, not just to grip the gunwales and cling on for dear life. When we read the Bible here we read stories about ourselves all the time. Until we step into them we may not recognise ourselves.

Last week we were on the mountain top. Peter and James and John were there, along with Moses and Elijah. We were there being invited and overwhelmed and awed and then encouraged to take that experience of wonder into the continuing journey. This week some of us at least are Peters. Step inside the scriptures, and let your hand be taken, your fears be transformed and your hope reawakened.

Amen.

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