

**Sermon 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14), Yr. A @ St Johns – 9/8/20**  
**“Stepping out with Christ” (Matthew 14:22-33)**  
**- Pastor André Meyer**

Pray: Father, thank you for this time together as we now hear your Word today. Open our hearts to your message for each of us, in Jesus' name, Amen.

We recall from last week, that Jesus had miraculously fed a huge crowd of over 5,000 on the north eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. Many were likely pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem, as well as a mix of curious locals who wanted to see and hear from Jesus. So, it was a day of healing, ministry, and a miraculous feeding, full of Messianic meaning, hope and symbolism for the people. As a result of the amazing things they experienced, John tells us that many wanted to make Jesus king by force (Jn.6:15). Our text today from Matthew hints at this, picking up Jesus' urgency to get His disciples far away from that kind of thinking. He wanted to head back to Capernaum but didn't want a crowd of thousands following and causing trouble. So, He makes His disciples get into the boat and head back to the other side. He then dismissed the crowd and went off alone to spend time in prayer with His Heavenly Father, and reflect on John the Baptist's death.

To understand what follows a little more, we need to know the Gospel of Matthew was written at a time when Christians in the early church were being persecuted for their faith in Christ. By this time, Peter the Apostle had most likely been martyred. So then, for future generations to know what happened when Jesus was upon earth, the truth needed to be written down and passed on. This account of the disciples out on the boat in a storm and all afraid, would have spoken powerfully to the early Church as they faced danger, fear, and doubt every day, and, they would have drawn encouragement from God's ability to save through His Son.

That evening, as the disciples were out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, a fierce storm came upon them. Sitting 200 metres below sea level, The Sea of Galilee is known for its sudden weather changes as cool winds from the Mediterranean sweep down through the steep ravines and collide with the warmer inland air, whipping up sudden storms. These storms are dreaded by fishermen in their typically 8 metre by 2 metre fishing boats, and even our hardened fisherman disciples were having difficulty battling the waves and the headwinds in the pitch black conditions that night. There seemed to be no relief from the storm, and the safety of the shore was nowhere in sight as the little boat was thrown around by the wind and the waves. The language used describes the boat as if it were being *tortured*. So, after many hours of fighting the storm it is clear that the boat and its passengers were indeed distressed by its ferocity. They felt its chaos and terror as the boat was slammed by the wind and the waves which threatened to take them

to a watery grave. On their own, *without* Jesus they would have felt truly alone. Where was He?

If only Jesus were *here now* to help them. He was the Great Teacher, miracle worker and healer, *but now*, He was nowhere near. “*Why did He urge us to go out on the lake and leave Him? We should have stayed with Him.*” Now they were far from shore, and might even drown out there in the storm. Even the hardened fishermen felt fear and were nearing the end of their tether. Still, they fought on in the darkness and through the wind, rain and waves crashing over them.

After a few more terrifying hours of fighting the seas they realised dawn would soon arrive. Yet the storm persisted, blowing on and on... Then, coming across the turbulent waters and through the howling wind, one of them spotted something coming towards them. It was shaped like a man. Is it a *ghost*? They literally shrieked in terror, says Matthew and become even more fearful. Not only is the watery turmoil of seas representative of demonic chaos, and the sea itself a watery grave of death, now, they are about to be tortured by an apparition – *a ghost* – a demonic spirit sent to overcome them. No wonder they cry out in fear – as their exhaustion turns to hopelessness and now into dread.

Then, as it moves towards them, above the howling wind and the chaos of the waves, they hear a voice clear and powerful, yet familiar as well... “*Take courage! I AM. Don't be afraid!*” Could it be? “*It's Jesus!*” one of them cried. But, He is walking towards them *on the water*! They could hardly believe their eyes! He who can calm the raging storm, feed multitudes and heal the sick, *also* has power to tread upon the chaos of the demonic realm as well (Gen. 3:15).

It was then that Peter had a moment of doubt about what he was seeing. “*Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water.*” He trusts that if it really is Jesus, then He will enable him to move on the face of the waters as well. “*Come,*” said Jesus. Despite his doubts Jesus invited Peter to *come out upon* the raging waters and to walk *with Him* amongst the turbulent and demonic waves! Jesus called him to step out in faith *onto* the troubled waters and *be with* Him. What amazes us is that Peter actually did! He stepped out *in faith*. He stepped onto the water *and*, it held! He trusted a little more, and stepped out again and again, to walk upon the water, to do what *Jesus was doing*, and *to be* where Jesus *was*! Amazing!

Then, just as *we* would, Peter began to feel the immensity of the task; the raging winds, the wild waters and towering waves threatening to engulf him. “*Is it truly real that I am actually walking on water?! Or, is it a dream?*” In that moment, he took his eyes off Jesus – probably because he'd never been *so scared* in his life! He looked at his feet on the water; he saw the wind and waves and remembered their overwhelming power... and, he began to sink. He let his trust in Jesus be

overwhelmed by the stormy conditions he found himself in. By a little faith Jesus had given Peter the ability *to do* the impossible. And just as quickly, he lost sight of the fact that Jesus was in charge of the situation. He became distracted by the danger and the moment, and he sank. It looked as if the dark chaos was going to consume him. But somehow, Peter remembers that *Jesus is also out there* with him on the water and he calls out: “*Lord, save me!*”

There is no pause in the story. Jesus doesn't let Peter sink any further. *Immediately* He comes to the rescue. Jesus' hand reaches out and catches Peter, and lifts him up to the surface once again. The lesson comes next: “*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*” The whole experience would have stunned any of us too. “*Yes, why did I doubt? You did save me.*” What a glorious picture we have next: Peter walking through the turbulent waves, because *Jesus was with him*.

Today's account is a beautiful picture of the Church: *of us* as Jesus' disciples. We are here in this building, sitting as the Church here in the “*nave*” of the building. “*Nave*” is the Latin word for “*boat/ship*.” The early Church knew that the boat of disciples was also a picture of them, buffeted on all sides by temptations, trials, questions, doubts, sufferings, persecutions and death. So too, *we* as the people of God are not intended to stay tied up to the dock. We travel out in this ship, of the Body of Christ, out onto the stormy seas of life *together*. And Jesus is the One who sends us out. In fact, *He made the disciples* get into the boat and out onto the waves in the first place – that's how it begins (v.22). *We also* are sent out together *as* the Church, by Jesus, onto the stormy seas, and in the process, Jesus will reveal His power to save from the chaos of life, from the fears we face, and from the hopelessness of death. And it will cause us to worship Him, just as they did, as Lord *and* God.

When troubles rage all around us, when we are hit hard by doubts or trials, just as the disciples, we ask, “*Is Jesus with me in this storm I face?*” Can we, in the midst of our struggles, the chaos and storms believe that Jesus, with all His power and authority, is with us? There are times when we feel we need a sign that He's there with us as we venture out in faith across the stormy seas of life. And just as Peter, so too, there are times when we take our eyes off Jesus.

There are times when we feel we are sinking into darkness or despair because of the challenges we face ...sickness; death; decline in our health; indifference; troubles at home or at work; a godless society; the faithful falling away; an ageing membership; the changing times brought upon us by COVID; less and less willing helpers to do what needs to be done. So many things cause us to despair in the storm and to sink into the waters.

Getting out of the boat, like Peter did, and separating ourselves from the comfort of *the pews* is scary. It takes faith. By our own strength it usually means that we will be overwhelmed with the power of the storm we walk into. We can forget that we need Jesus, who is already out there on the waves, to survive the storms that He calls us into. We need God and we need to work together, by faith, to complete the seemingly impossible tasks for which we were sent. Where does Jesus then take Peter? He takes Peter full circle – back *to* the boat – but, with a different perspective of what God’s power can do. This new appreciation of God’s power to help and to save causes all of them to worship Jesus as the storm suddenly dies down. ...Proclaiming, *“Truly you are the Son of God!”*

This miracle is not about faith or the lack of it, and whether *we* sink or swim depending on how much faith we have. It’s not about surviving the storms because of anything *we do*. This is about Jesus, the Son of the living God, who doesn’t abandon us, even in the most fearful circumstances. And He showed it most powerfully by dying for us and our sins on the Cross. This story is about the love that reaches out to well-intentioned but wavering disciples, and the forgiveness and grace that never stops working for us, which assures us that God indeed knows what He’s doing in our lives. In stepping out on the stormy seas of life, Jesus is always telling us: *“Take courage! I AM. Don’t be afraid.”* ...For we can know that God’s Hand will reach out to save us – anywhere, anytime. Amen.