

Sermon preached at Soham on 13th August 2017 – Proper 14

Matthew 14:22-33

The people who say they find trust easy are often those who don't have to do it. It's easy to say that you trust God to keep you safe when you're not the one with bombs going off around you, or the one who has been trafficked and is being used as a slave. It's easy to say that you trust God to supply all your needs when you're not the one who's starving, not knowing if the next meal will come. It's easy to say that you trust God when God's never asked you to do something difficult. It's easy to say that you trust God when you've never been let down by those you've trusted. It's easy to say that you trust God when you're not looking at your whole world crumbling around your ears, when you're not in Donald Trump's firing line, when you're not seeing your home and livelihood flooded yet again as a consequence of climate change. And it's easy to judge those who admit that they find trust difficult when you haven't had your own ability to trust tested.

In this morning's gospel reading there is a moment at which Peter trusts Jesus. You might think that they trust each other all the time – after all, they are friends; they are rabbi and disciple, they are teacher and apprentice. But actually those relationships don't entail huge amounts of trust: each has something invested in the relationship and a level of trust is there, but each is free to walk away whenever they choose; each is free to do his own thing without the other in tow. But this moment is different. Because in this moment, Peter's life is in Jesus' hands. He has seen Jesus walking on the water, and is trusting Jesus to enable him to do the same. If Jesus lets him down then Peter could lose his life, his future, the future and security of his family. So in that moment, when Peter gets out of the boat, he trusts Jesus.

I wonder when we have placed that level of trust in God.

People have tried to interpret this story in different ways. Some say, for example, that perhaps there were rocks just under the surface of the water and Jesus walked on these but Peter slipped off. Some say that this story is just that, a story, one which has a point to make, rather than a story about something which actually happened. There's certainly much in the story that has a symbolic value. The sea, in biblical times, represented evil, all that was malign in the world, all that resisted God, all that was to be battled against. The creation story in Genesis, where God is described as gathering the water together in one place so that dry land appears, is seen partly as a story of victory over the sea and all that it represents. In the story of Noah it's the flood water, the sea, which is used as God's instrument of judgement. In the book of Revelation – the prophecy of what will happen at Jesus' second coming – there is a 'beast of the sea' which represents all that is at war with God; and later in Revelation, after that sea beast has been defeated, there is talk of a new heaven and a new earth – and no more sea. So the sea was something for the disciples to be afraid of; and the image of Jesus walking on the water, unharmed, is an image of victory over evil. Of course, the symbolism loses none of its value and power when we look at this as a story about something which actually happened – if anything, it becomes more powerful if we recognise Jesus as actually, rather than symbolically, victorious. And for God, who is all-powerful and therefore, by definition, can do anything, to walk on water – well, why not? But whatever you think about how this story should be understood, you can't get away from that moment when Peter trusts Jesus.

Tom Wright, in his commentary on this story, uses a couple of super phrases that show how actually this story reflects what goes on in our own lives. We're no different to Peter and the rest of the disciples, because what's going on for them – and for us – is a life of "half-faith", or faith mixed with fear and doubt. Fear of circumstances, fear of failing, fear of being let down, doubt of ourselves, doubt of God's ability or even willingness to uphold us, doubt of God's very nature. A life of "half-faith". A desire to trust, but a struggle every time we have opportunity to do so. He describes Peter as being "caught between glory and terror". Caught between glory and terror – a desire to follow and a vision of what life could be, mixed with fear and a feeling of being trapped by the power of circumstances.

I wonder when we find ourselves caught between glory and terror. I wonder how often we find ourselves living a life of half-faith, wanting to trust God but struggling to do so.

There is a book, on my bookshelf, with the title “If you want to walk on water, you’ve got to get out of the boat”. That seems to be a crucial message from this story. Jesus and Peter walked on the water – and while we might not be too surprised at Jesus, given the other miraculous things he’d done, Peter is a person just like us. In fact, there was a boat full of people just like us, as the other disciples were there too – but what stands out is that Peter got out of the boat. And for a few moments, unforgettable moments, he walked on water. I would guess he never forgot that, and in the future, in the rest of the story we read in the gospels and Acts, he still has occasions when he messes up, when he doesn’t succeed; but as time goes on he also demonstrates great power, healing and preaching. Trust, Peter living out his life of faith, doesn’t develop overnight, it begins with small steps – and getting out of the boat was a significant one of them.

It’s about taking a risk. I don’t know what your approach is to risk-taking; I’m someone who’s pretty risk-averse, I like certainty and security. But I can’t help wondering what would happen if not only I, but all of us, were prepared to take such risks. Not risks in the sense of thrill-seeking, or of doing things because we can, with little thought to the consequences. But risks in the sense of listening to what God calls us to do, and stepping out to do it. It’s hugely risky! It might involve things which cost us a lot of time or energy. It might involve stopping much of what we currently do as a church to focus on something different. It might involve trusting God to provide resources – people, money, time... It would definitely involve change, because the body of Christ is a living body and living involves change.

I wonder whether, together, we are willing to take such a risk.

I wonder whether we’re willing to spend time asking God what we are being called to be and to do. I wonder whether we’re willing to risk listening for God’s answers. I wonder whether, as we find ourselves caught between glory and terror, we are willing to help each other to take that step... If you want to walk on water, you’ve got to get out of the boat.

There is a call here, to us as church and to us as individuals, to trust. Not to do amazing things, but just to take the next step on from where we currently are; to look at what we know about Jesus and take a step towards that in spite of our fear, in spite of the times we’ve been let down by those we’ve trusted, in spite of the times we’ve felt God has let us down. It’s a call to trust the God who loves us more than we can imagine.

I wonder whether, together, we are willing to take our next step.