

Sermon 13 August 2023 Jesus Walks on Water

Philippians 4:10-13 Matthew 14:22-32

Jesus walks on water. This takes place very soon after the feeding of the five thousand, and is quite similar in terms of its credence and also the message. The image of Jesus walking on water has crept into the English language in a variety of ways, and especially as a metaphor to describe someone who is capable of amazing things. 'He could walk on water' means that the person being referred to can do things out of the ordinary.

So here we have the first similarity to the story of the feeding of the five thousand. As I said last week, if you have difficulty in getting your head around a particular story, we look for the message and therein we find the truth. So again, one of the messages is, God is capable of anything.

I think the main message to come out of this story is ostensibly a message of faith, but if we unpack it and delve a little deeper, we discover varied layers to this over-riding theme of faith. One of the underlying, and probably the primary message is that Jesus comes to us in those challenging moments in our lives and if we are to prevail, then it is so very important that we remain focussed on him; that we do not take our eyes off him. This, of course, requires a significant degree of faith.

Look what happened to Peter. When he sees Jesus walking on the water, he wants to do the same. Jesus encourages him, 'Come on Peter, you can do it.' Peter is doing fine until he takes his eyes off Jesus. He looks around at the waves and is suddenly assailed by doubts and fear, and so he starts to sink. Jesus, of course, reaches out his hand and pulls him to safety. Let me relate a relevant story.

Years ago, Roger Bannister was a track star at Oxford University in England. He was so good that his coach believed he could break the four-minute mile – something no one had ever done. Roger was not so sure, but because his coach believed in him, he began to believe in himself.

Then came the morning of May 8th 1954. The morning dawned cold and a little wet. It was a terrible day for running a race. Only a small crowd were on hand to watch the race. The runners lined up, the starting gun fired, and the rest is history. Three minutes and 59 seconds later, Roger Bannister collapsed across the finishing line. He had become the first person to break the four-minute mile.

Now forty-six days later, an Australian runner, John Landy, became the second man to accomplish the feat. This set the stage for a dream race between Bannister and Landy a few months later in Canada. Landy led for most of the race, until they were about to enter the final straight, and then he did something he should never have done. He glanced over his left shoulder to see where Bannister was. But Bannister was just behind him on his right shoulder, and this was just the chance Bannister needed. He swept past him to win the race.

So what is the relevance between the stories of Bannister and Landy and Peter's short venture out of the boat and onto the water? Firstly, an issue of faith. Bannister's coach believed that he, Bannister, could break that elusive four-minute mile, and so Bannister came to believe it himself. Without that belief, he would never have achieved it. Similarly, Peter had faith in Jesus and so was able to initially do the impossible.

However, Peter took his eyes off Jesus. He looked around at the waves and was immediately filled with doubt. He lost his focus. In a similar way, Landy lost his focus. If he had kept his eyes firmly on the goal in front of him, on the finishing line, he would have undoubtedly prevailed.

So how does this relate you and me in our everyday lives? As I said before, if we unpack this story we find there are several layers. That is actually the case with any of the stories relating to Jesus, whether they be stories about him or stories he himself relates.

Firstly, if we are to achieve anything at all, but especially anything of note, we have to step out of the boat. That takes courage and that takes faith. It is too easy just to remain firmly seated in the boat. You have heard the expression, 'to step out in faith.' Well, this story certainly affirms that expression.

Secondly, God is always there for us and by having the faith to place ourselves in his hands, we can achieve the seemingly impossible. One of my favourite verses in the Bible, one which we heard in our first reading, comes from Paul, *'For I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me strength.'* Philippians 4:13. Peter was able to step out of the boat and begin walking on the water purely because of his faith in Jesus.

I repeat what I wrote in last week's prayer request. *'We believe in miracles, but often the miracle is what we can achieve when we place ourselves in God's hands and ask for his strength and guidance to achieve a particular outcome.'*

Finally, when Peter took his eyes off Jesus, he began to sink. It is so very important that we don't take our eyes off our inspiration, our rock – God. And Christ is our link and our pathway to God. In the hurly-burly of life, the disappointments, the distractions, it is all too easy to lose that focus and that belief that we are going to prevail. I have to keep reminding myself of that as we battle the headwinds on our journey towards the building of our new church and community centre.

I leave the final words to Isaiah, *'The Lord says, 'When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown! When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, your Saviour.'''* Isaiah 43:2-3. Now that is a powerful and very comforting note to finish on!

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