

# Matthew 14.22-36

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*Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus*

Studley Parish Church

Sunday 12 June 2016

## Leaving

When David left his curacy – as he told many of you I'm sure – he took Genesis 22.5 as his text.

Abraham said to his young men, 'Abide ye here with the ass; I will go yonder and worship.'

*Genesis 22.5 (KJV)*

I have spent a long time trying to find a suitable verse for me to take this morning. I did wonder about Colossians 1.13:

God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons.

*Colossians 1.13 (MSG)*

But then I remembered Colossians 3.2:

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

*Colossians 3.2 (NIV)*

So I stopped trying to find a silly Bible verse, and instead focused on Matthew 14. So my verse for this morning is:

‘Come,’ [Jesus] said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus.

*Matthew 14.29 (NIV)*

But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

## **A Different Drum**

You may have noticed that the reading this morning isn't the one advertised on the news sheet. That's because in our Centre+Point and Church+Praise services since Easter, we have been working through a series called 'A Different Drum'. As in, Christians march to the beat of a different drum.

In the first half of the series, we are looking at passages where Jesus invites us to 'Come': to come to him and learn the beat, to learn how to march to *his* beat, not our own.

And as today was going to have a Centre+Point service until I decided it would be my final Sunday, we decided to have what we normally do at Centre+Point, but in church, to share what happens at the Parish Centre every month, if you didn't already know.

## Jesus Prays

Immediately before our passage, Jesus fed thousands of people with a packed lunch. He'd only just heard that John the Baptist had been killed, and so **he withdraw by boat privately to a solitary place** (14.13), no doubt to pray and to grieve quietly.

But the crowds followed, **he had compassion on them** (14.14), and ended up feeding over **five thousand men, besides women and children** (14.21).

It had been quite a day – no wonder he wanted solitude, time to pray and be with his Father. So he sent his disciples **on ahead of him to the other side**, and **dismissed the crowd** (22). Then he **went up on a mountainside by himself to pray** (23), to recharge his batteries and mourn the loss of John.

## The Storm

But while Jesus was praying on the mountain, his disciples weren't doing so well. They'd made it a **considerable distance from land** (24), somewhere in the middle of the lake. But, they were being **buffeted by the waves**, and **the wind was against** them (24).

I imagine they were exhausted. They had left hours earlier, almost certainly during daylight, while Jesus **dismissed the crowd** (22). They had been struggling all night, trying to get across **to the other side**, as Jesus had told them (22).

Picture the disciples, heaving at those oars, desperately trying to make it safely **to the other side** of the lake.

Now picture yourself – what sort of place are you in? Are you rowing calmly across the lake of your life? Or are you, like the disciples, straining with all your might, while feeling like you aren't making any progress?

I've been there – for years I wondered if I would ever reach this point, about to take up my first incumbency. When my first curacy ended, I thought I would be placed somewhere else by the end of the year. That year was 2009. I didn't start here until 2013, and let me tell you, those years were not easy. I felt like the disciples, straining with all my might. It wasn't until 2014 that I finally took a step forward, and was priested, five years on.

I'm going to pause for a moment and let you reflect – what is the biggest storm you feel you are facing right now? It could be a personal storm, or a shared one – but what is the biggest?

# Jesus walks on water

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. ‘It’s a ghost,’ they said, and cried out in fear.

*Matthew 14.25-26 (NIV)*

I love it how the Bible is so matter-of-fact. *Shrug...* **Jesus went out... shrug... walking on the lake** (25). The way Matthew writes it: of *course* Jesus was **walking on the lake**.

The disciples thought Jesus was **a ghost**, because *people don’t do that sort of thing*. The magician Dynamo famously walked on water on the Thames in London. Except, he didn’t. It was a trick – I don’t know exactly how he did it, but no doubt he was walking on something hidden just beneath the surface of the river.

Well, there was no such thing as plexiglass in Jesus’ day – and there was certainly not a couple of miles of it extending out to the disciples’ boat. No, this is what Job prophesied:

God alone stretches out the heavens  
and treads on the waves of the sea.

*Job 9.8 (NIV)*

For the people of Israel, water – and especially storms – were the symbol for evil, chaos, and disaster. Showing God’s mastery over water was their way of showing that God was over, stronger and greater than *everything*.

When Jesus walked on water it was not a magic trick, but a clear demonstration of who he was: for **God alone treads on the waves of the sea**. The waves were buffeting the disciples’ boat, stopping them making any progress – but Jesus walked calmly across them.

## Peter walks on water

Except of course, Jesus isn’t the only one who walked on water.

When the disciples realised it was Jesus and not a ghost after all, Peter was the first to speak up. I do love Peter!

‘Lord, if it’s you,’ Peter replied, ‘tell me to come to you on the water.’

*Matthew 14.28 (NIV)*

Jesus had been training his disciples, and giving them power and authority to preach the good news, to heal the sick and to cast out demons. Perhaps Peter thought this was next on the list of powers he was going to be given?

I love the next bit.

‘Come,’ Jesus said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus.

*Matthew 14.29 (NIV)*

I mean – *come on!* Peter *actually* walked across the water to Jesus. With a storm raging around him, waves crashing into the boat, wind howling, rain pouring. What a moment that must have been.

And yet there were no fireworks, no puff of smoke, no ‘alakazam’. Jesus said, **‘Come,’ Peter got down out of the boat and walked on the water.**

I imagine his heart was pounding, but he had his eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, and so it was ok. With his eyes on Jesus, who was saying, **‘Come,’** with his arm outstretched, Peter **walked on the water.**

## True Faith

But when he saw the wind, [Peter] was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’

*Matthew 14.30 (NIV)*

This is how I know Peter was focused on Jesus when he **got down out of the boat** (29) – because, once he was on the water, he stopped looking at Jesus and **saw the wind** (30). In the middle of a storm, you can almost literally ‘see’ the wind, whipping up the sea spray, swirling the rain around you.

It must have been terrifying – no wonder Peter began **to sink** when he stopped looking at Jesus and instead focused on the storm. As we saw earlier in the service, things are much harder when there are distractions. One of the most important lessons for a disciple to learn – if not *the* most important lesson – is how to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, while the storm rages around us.

You see, this storm wasn’t even that bad. In Matthew 8 – where Jesus is asleep in the boat and *then* calms the storm – Matthew describes the storm as a *seismos megas*. The word *seismos* is the root word for ‘seismograph’ – it means *earthquake*. And I’ll let you work out what *megas* means for yourself.

This storm was no *seismos megas*, but it was enough to cause Peter to lose his focus on Jesus, and he began **to sink**.



Peter's response to this was quite sensible: **'Lord, save me!'** (30). He was so close to Jesus by this point that **Jesus reached out his hand and caught him** (31). One more step and Peter would have made it to Jesus, but he looked away and fear took over.

No wonder Jesus said, **'You of little faith... why did you doubt?'** (31). It's not that Peter didn't have *enough* faith – it's not about quantity – it's that his faith wasn't *deep* enough, it wasn't *focused* enough. It wasn't deep enough to keep him trusting Jesus when he **saw the wind**, it wasn't focused enough to keep his eyes fixed on Jesus, even when he was being **buffeted by the waves**.

True faith means keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, and letting go of the things we *think* keep us secure, climbing **down out of the boat**, and trusting Jesus to stop us from sinking.

True faith means keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, trusting that even when we stumble, we will not fall, because he will **reach out his hand and catch** us.

True faith is not about quantity – even a tiny amount will do – because true faith is about the one in whom we trust.

True faith means keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, so we know it isn't about what *we* can do, but about what *he* can do, *through* us. We watched a video of Nick Vujicic (voo-yee-cheech) earlier. He said this, 'If God can use a man without arms and legs to be His hands and feet, then He will certainly use any willing heart!'

True faith means keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus; and we do that by bathing our life in prayer.<sup>1</sup> When we pray, we refocus ourselves on Jesus. Prayer makes us look up, to see Jesus standing there, his arm outstretched, saying, **'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. Come.'** He is always there, no matter what storms we face.

When we don't pray, when we focus on the storms instead of on Jesus, *that's* when we start **to sink**.

I find it hard to pray. But I *keep trying* because without it I lose my focus on Jesus, and I start **to sink**. Friends, don't give up on prayer. If you forget everything I've said in the last three years, at least remember this: learn what it means to pray without ceasing.

Because there are some pretty big storms around at the moment, and what will stop these churches from sinking, isn't the rector. Like you, he isn't perfect, but he is a good and faithful man. But he can't stop these churches from sinking.

And neither can a building in the heart of Studley actually, useful though that would be. What will stop these churches from sinking is prayer, because only prayer will keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

And we can only walk on water when we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, get **down out of the boat**, and walk **towards Jesus** (29).

## The Milky Way

I'm going to finish with a story. In 2005, I spent a few weeks in Africa training local churches in listening and pastoral skills.

One of the courses we led was in a village called Mokhotlong, 10,000 feet high in the Drakensberg mountains of Lesotho, with no electricity and only a few gas lamps. So each day, when we walked home, we were in almost total darkness. We had torches, and kept our eyes firmly fixed on the uneven ground to make sure we didn't trip over.

On the third night, as we walked back, for some reason I looked up. And I will never, *ever* forget what I saw. There, across the sky, was a band of stars, so many that they merged into one, becoming, as it were, a *Milky Way* across the sky. All around, either side of it, were countless stars. It took my breath away, and I lay on the ground to stare at the scale and sheer beauty of the universe.

As I was lying there, I finally understood *why* our galaxy is called the Milky Way! But I also saw God's promise to Abram, that he would have more descendants than stars in the sky, in a new light.

As I was lying there, I felt at once absolutely tiny, and yet incredibly loved. The total number of stars in the universe has twenty-two zeroes after it – and there is only one of me, and yet, God loves me. The stars are unimaginably far away, and yet, Jesus is with me always, wherever I go and whatever storm threatens me.

Friends, look up.

Look up, and see, not the Milky Way, but Jesus. He is always there, *no matter what storms you face*. Look up, and see Jesus.

Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus; for *that* is true faith. How *much* you have doesn't matter. What matters is the one *in whom* you believe. So keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, who says *stretch out your hand*, **'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. Come.'**

Will you?

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<sup>1</sup> See Carson, *Matthew* (EBC), 392.