

Matthew 14.22-36

Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus

Edgbaston Old Church

Sunday 13 August 2023

A long day

I wonder – have you ever had a Really Long Day? The sort of day where you get up early, you're on the go constantly, then get home, flop on a chair or sofa, and barely have the energy to eat?

Four years ago my wife Jess and I took a month off work to go travelling round New Zealand in a camper van. It was an amazing time, my favourite of all the countries I've visited. I would love to go more often, but getting there is not easy.

We drove to Heathrow, then flew to Singapore, had a short wait in the airport, then flew to Auckland, then rode a bus to collect our camper, then drove to a supermarket to get some food, then to our first stop. It was well over 30 hours in total, 23 of them in the air. By the time we arrived we were totally exhausted, but had to stay awake as long as possible to avoid getting really bad jetlag.

Jesus Prays

Immediately before our passage, Jesus fed thousands of people with a packed lunch. He'd 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 for his relative.

But the crowds followed. Thankfully he was more patient than me, so he didn't send them away with a grumpy 'Leave me alone' – **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 – he desperately needed the solitude that had been interrupted earlier. 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 pray and be with his Father, recharge his batteries and mourn John's death.

The Storm

But while Jesus was by himself, praying on the mountainside, his disciples weren't doing so well. They'd made it a **considerable distance from land** (24), so they were 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 myself several times. I had a break from full-time ministry in 2009 – I thought it would be six months, it ended up being four years. For the past couple of years I've been suffering with Meniere's Disease, which affects my balance and causes sudden attacks of vertigo.

For you it might be work, health, family, church – all sorts of things can make us feel like the disciples, straining with all my might against the wind and the storm. So 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 declaring that God was stronger and greater than *everything*. The waves were buffeting the disciples’ boat, stopping any progress – but Jesus walked calmly across those same waves, demonstrating clearly who he was: for as Job says, **God alone treads on the waves of the sea**. He alone has power and authority over the deep, over chaos and evil.

Yet the wonderful truth is that he shares that power...

Peter walks 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 mean, it would be quite useful for a fisherman! He’d save a fortune in boat costs.

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. What must the other disciples have thought? ‘Pinch me, I’m dreaming?’ Looking at one another: ‘Are *you* seeing this too?’ 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.** There was no fanfare, only simple obedience.

Peter’s 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, as it whips up the sea spray, and swirls the rain around you.

It must have been terrifying – no wonder Peter began **to sink** when he stopped looking at Jesus and instead saw the storm. 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 was bad, but it wasn't *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 *mega* 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, letting go of the things we *think* keep us afloat, climbing **down out of the boat**.

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. He is *always* there, no matter what storms we face.

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.

True faith means keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus; and we do that by bathing our life in prayer.ⁱ When we pray, we refocus ourselves on Jesus. Prayer makes us look up, to see Jesus standing there, arm outstretched, saying, **'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. Come.'** When we *don't* pray, when we focus on the storms instead of on Jesus, *that's* when we start **to sink**.

True faith is not about quantity – even a tiny amount will do. Faith is not like going to the gym to build up your muscle mass. Faith is like fixing your eyes on a landmark so you can walk in a straight line and end up in the right place. Faith is less something you *have*, and much more something you *do*.

The more we learn to fix our eyes on Jesus, the less we'll wander off and the more we'll travel in the direction he's calling us – and eventually end up in the right place.

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.'**

What will you do?

¹ See Carson, *Matthew (EBC)*, 392.