

Matthew chapter 14, verses 22 to 33- This incident- What is it all about?

The action takes place on a fishing boat that has set sail to cross the Sea of Galilee. Matthew has been given us an account of Jesus preaching to the people and feeding the hungry crowd. Afterwards, at the end of the day, a very tired Jesus orders the disciples onto the boat so that they can get away; Jesus himself dismisses the crowd and takes himself off, up the mountains to pray.

Next, the disciples play a key role. Having embarked on an evening sailing, they get caught up in the notorious quick changing weather conditions of this large inland water. They are trying to get to the shore but, the wind is blowing against them hence they are in a battle with the waves buffeting the boat. Struggling and preoccupied, they half look up and catch a glimpse of a figure walking from the shore towards the boat. In semi darkness, perhaps still with the moon up, they cry out in fear at what looks like a ghost. It's a double whammy- there is a real danger of the boat being overturned and themselves drowning and they are confronted by a spirit- perhaps of the rage of the sudden squall.

The scene is reminiscent of the account in chapter eight of the Calming of the Storm. Both can act as a picture of the Church as a boat crossing the bumpy waters of being on a journey of faith together. We note that in the midst of fear and challenge, the disciples discover more about Jesus.

However, it's Peter who seems to have the starring role. His behaviour is very true to the character of the man we meet throughout the Gospels; a man of great enthusiasm and great passion, a man who acts from the heart, who jumps to defend his friends and is the first to volunteer.

On hearing Jesus call out, Peter responds without thinking, 'then command me to come to you on the water'. We can be drawn into seeing Peter as a role model- after all he is the one who first computes that it is Jesus and wants to be in amongst the action with his Rabbi; if so, is he in a muddle because he doesn't understand the reason for Jesus' power and authority.

But looking more closely, Peter calls back to figure on the water, '**If it's you**'. Peter shares some of the anxiety and fear we see displayed in the behaviour of the other disciples. 'If it's you'- indicates that this is Peter wanting proof- and so when he steps out of the boat, it is not with a bold unadulterated faith but to literally test the waters to see if they will hold him. After the initial flow of adrenalin or if you prefer, flood of enthusiasm, Peter's doubts come rushing into his mind and down he goes.

Too often we speak of Christian faith- as strong or weak, committed or absent, as real or not real, as born again or as an inoculation against the evils of life in the cradle. In Matthew's Gospel, we have a wonderful picture of **real-life** faith. This faith involves a desire to know and serve Jesus, but is also mixed, and sometimes apparently almost overcome, with doubt- like Peter beginning to sink among the waves. For us doubt come in many different forms. There is the self-doubt: 'Am I good enough for God, and am I really forgiven?' There is the feeling of doubt that it's all a bit impossible: 'Am I a real Christian? - Can I manage to not judge anyone, to be the peacemaker all of the time?' There is the doubt dressed up as the need to be perfect and strong whatever happens and so exhibit faith to move mountains. The doubts are all about the temptation to think that we are the agent of our own salvation; that we do it all on our own. And about living an illusion that the way of faith will be easy and we will not fail as we undertake the journey.

Peter cries out- 'Lord, save me!' He asks for help. And, very simply, that is what we must do. Sometimes we might sink into a weakness and be unable to call for help- but note that it's a quick shout not a fancy prayer and Jesus is close by- he can immediately reach out and take Peter by the hand. Peter's faith is somewhere deep inside: for Jesus' words are 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' Jesus doesn't say - 'You of no faith'. Peter loses his focus on Jesus, he takes his eye off the ball, he is distracted by fears and doubts; but then looks back to Jesus. We may take **our** eyes off Jesus and find ourselves struggling amongst the waves of doubt. We may even lose sight of the divine presence in our lives altogether, but it is still close by, close enough to touch our hearts and souls. Two other things matter. It's **Jesus** who sees the disciples in trouble and goes out to them rather than the disciples shouting out for help. There are other people travelling in the boat who can assist us.

We should handle this story with care. Jesus does not tell Peter that he needs **more** faith- Peter must work at sustaining his trust in Jesus. At the centre of faith is the maintenance of trust and thereby the nurture of hope; the kernel of faith is not about praying harder or growing in knowledge- it is simply about focussing on Jesus.

So, Matthew chapter 14, verses 22 to 33- This incident- What is it all about?

It all about Jesus: it is Jesus that makes the difference to everything.

And why? Because he is the Son of God. The account ends with all the disciples turning to Jesus, we see them in our minds eye encircling Jesus, albeit in the boat. They are overcome with awe and wonder and, the clouds of their mind open a chink and they glimpse something of who this Jesus really is. They go down on their knees to worship him. Verse 33 echoes the words spoken by Centurion at the foot of the Cross in Mark's Gospel; And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'.