

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I do like this story of St. Peter walking on the water, but then I'm a bit biased because before I came here I was vicar of St. Peter's in Notting Hill for 18 years. Over that time I did develop a deep affinity with this great character in the gospels. He's such a wonderful example of a faithful life. Peter lived out a great life of faith, which continues to be inspiring to us. He is, in so many ways, so easy to relate to, with all of his ups and downs, the way his faith comes and goes. Paul writes about faith often in the kind of densely argued passage that we had read to us from the epistle of Romans. St. Peter embodies faith. He lives it out.

I'm going to talk about faith this morning, and I'm going to be referring more to the story of St. Peter, rather than the deep prose of St. Paul. The story, I think, that we have here of Peter walking on the water illustrates two great characteristics of faith. Before I say what they are, I want to say something by way of background to this story. The story comes straight after the feeding of the 5,000, so when it refers at the beginning of the story to the crowds, it's those crowds who have just been fed by that amazing miracle of taking the loaves and the fishes and feeding 5,000 people. Jesus was at the height of his popularity, and there was a great clamor for him to lead a political movement, as there was this rather febrile atmosphere in Palestine at the time. We know that some of the disciples could be a bit excitable. Some of them may have wanted Jesus to fulfill the political ambitions of the crowd. Maybe that's why Jesus makes them get into the boat, we're told. He wants to be alone to pray. He sends them off in a boat - maybe thinks it's good that everyone has a chance to calm down.

That's how we get to this situation where Jesus is by himself on the bank, and the disciples are out in a boat, caught up in a storm. What happens next has long troubled Biblical scholars. It's troubled some of those who have no problem with the miraculous or the miracle that's portrayed here. What's troubling is that the walking on the water seems to serve no particular purpose. When Jesus

turned water into wine it was to keep the wedding party going. When he took a few loaves and fishes and fed 5,000, it was to feed the crowd. Why here does he take a stroll on the sea? I think it's fair to say that whilst Jesus could walk on water, he normally traveled by boat. Why does he walk on the water here?

I don't have any answer to that question, but it does make me think about how faith in Jesus is born. In my experience, when most people talk about their journey of faith, of how they came to have faith in Jesus, they could often talk in vague prosaic terms. They'll talk of childhood experiences, of kind friends, of a gradual process of coming to believe in Jesus. However, I do occasionally meet some people who tell me dramatic stories of encounters with the living Jesus, with visions or dreams - Jesus coming in extraordinary ways. That is how faith was born in them. Jesus still comes to his disciples in different ways, often ways that seem ordinary, but sometimes in ways that are extraordinary. What we have here is definitely Jesus coming to his disciples in an extraordinary way.

Let me go to the two great characteristics of the life of faith that we see exemplified in this story. The first is obedience. I used to think that this story was a story about Peter's recklessness, but it's not a story which glorifies risk taking for its own sake. Jesus is not looking in his disciples for bungee-jumping, hang-gliding, tornado-chasing thrill seekers. Peter is not walking on the water for recreational purposes here. This is not a story about extreme sports. It's a story about extreme discipleship. When Peter sees Jesus walking on the water, he says this, "Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you on the water." This was no mere impulse on Peter's part. He didn't see Jesus and then hop out of the boat. It was only when Jesus said, "Come.", that Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water. This is not a story about recklessness. It's a story about obedience. Peter answered Jesus' call.

To speak positively about obedience today is to be profoundly counter-cultural. There is a valid suspicion of talk about obedience, grounded in an

experience of authoritarianism. Obedience is confused with blind obedience, which is morally odious. Obedience is confused with conformity, with going along without asking any questions. Obedience really means responsiveness. It's related to the Latin word *audire*, to hear, to listen, to respond appropriately. Obedience is not the surrender of responsibility, but rather the acceptance of responsibility to what we respond to and how. We all obey something. We all put our faith in something, so why not obey the call of him who made us?

I hope that everybody's got a copy of one of these brochures. It's too long to read now, but do take it away and look at it later. I mention it because on the front of this brochure which is about our outreach, there's a commandment of Jesus that needs to be obeyed. "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you." My hope is that in the coming months you'll be hearing more about this and the outreach work that we do at St. James, with an opportunity for people to get involved so we have more people engaged in that work. You'll see there, there are specific opportunities and invitations to take up Jesus' command to love practically those around us in our neighborhood, to serve, to show our love in practical ways. There'll be more about that in due course.

So much for obedience. The second characteristic of faith that we see lived out in this story is courage. When St. Peter heard the call of Jesus, it must have taken great courage to get out of the boat. Remember there's a storm going on. The waters weren't flat. There were waves, yet Peter stepped out. John Ortberg wrote a very good book about this story entitled, "If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat", which is true. If we want to grow, if we want to grow in faith, we have to have the courage to take risks, to do things we haven't done before, to do the unlikely thing. That's what Peter does here. He shows great courage. The rest of the disciples who stayed in the boat, when they first see Jesus, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they cried out. It goes on, "Immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.'"

The phrase, "It is I" here is a loaded phrase. It's more than Jesus waving to them and saying, "Hi! It's me!". In the Greek, that phrase is "ego eimi", or "I am". It's the same phrase that Moses heard when he was confronted with the burning bush and he hears that voice and he says, "Who shall I say sent me?", and the voice says, "I am." It's the same phrase. "I am" in the Old Testament is one of the names for God. One thing we shouldn't miss in this story is that the really amazing thing in this story isn't what Peter was walking on, it's who he was walking with. Mark's gospel makes the point even clearer. When this story's being told it says, "Jesus intended to pass them by." That phrase "pass by" is another technical phrase that's in the Old Testament. We see it in that reading that we had, our first reading today. It's a technical word describing a moment of self, of divine self disclosure. When Elijah is told to stand on the mountain, he's told to wait there until the Lord passes by. It's the same phrase.

Peter's courage, his faith, his strength, come from knowing the identity of who he was with. If you were here last week when we were thinking about that mysterious story of the transfiguration, you'll see the same theme emerging in this story. Namely, the revelation of the divine identity of Jesus. The disciples, including Peter, slowly come to recognize Jesus for who he is, which is why, at the end of the story, they name him as the Son of God and worship him.

Before wrapping up, I have one more thought on the subject of faith. Again it refers to that first reading we had from the Old Testament which includes a phrase which is reckoned to be in Hebrew the hardest thing to translate for all Biblical translators. If you've got a rack of Bibles in different translations and look to this passage, you'll see there's a phrase half way through which will be different in all of them, and it's different because nobody knows quite how to translate, what in the original Hebrew says something like, "They heard the sound of sheer silence." It's untranslatable. How can you have a sound of silence? We can't describe it, but we recognize it when it comes.

So it is with faith. It's a slippery thing. It comes and it goes. We can't put it into words, but we know when we have it. Maybe some here think they don't have that gift of faith, in which case please come and talk to me afterwards. I'd love to talk about that. Whilst we can't describe faith, this story at least highlights two of its great characteristics: obedience and courage. May God in his grace give us the ability, like Peter, to live out a life of faith.

Amen.