

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 9th Sunday after Trinity – 9th August 2020

Service at All Saints' Marseille

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Last week we saw how the accounts of Jesus's miracles operate on different levels. We saw too how the miracle stories carry echoes of Old Testament scriptural texts, meditating on how prophecies were being fulfilled, using symbolism to apply in a present context truths understood from the past. Matthew's Gospel includes two miracles involving the sea: the one in which Jesus is asleep in the boat with his disciples and, when woken by them in fear of drowning, calms the wind and the waves; and the one today where he walks towards them on the water and tells them not to be afraid.

In the Old Testament, the sea was a symbol of chaos and evil, over which the Spirit of God moved at the beginning of creation. The prophets and psalmists, writing at times of distress and persecution, would often recall what God had done for his people in the past, asking him to show his power in the present. Psalm 89, verse 8 states: 'You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them'; and in Psalm 77.19-20 we read: 'Your way was through the sea, your path through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron'. The writers recall not only God ruling over the waters of chaos in creation, but also the Exodus in which his people were led to freedom.

In Matthew's Gospel, we are being shown that here is the long-awaited Messiah, who will lead God's people once more to freedom, facing down the powers of chaos and evil. Coming straight after the feeding of the five thousand, with its echo of Moses feeding the Israelites in the desert, here is Jesus – again, like Moses – walking through the sea, leading his people to freedom. Yet Matthew is also saying that this is *more* than a new Moses. In the English translation the words are: 'Take heart: it is I; do not be afraid', but in the original Greek it says: 'Take heart: I AM (*ego eimi*, the divine name revealed to Moses)'. Matthew is pointing to Jesus's intimate connection with Yahweh, the one who when asked his name replied 'I AM who I AM', the source and end of all that is. When Jesus gets into the boat with them, the astonished disciples say: 'Truly you are the Son of God'. We will hear those words again at the end of the story, spoken by the centurion at the foot of the Cross.

Although the miracle of Jesus walking on the water also appears in the Gospels of Mark and John, Matthew's account adds the scene of Peter getting out of the boat to walk towards Jesus - starting to walk, then noticing the strength of the wind and feeling his courage fail. How easy it is to identify with Peter in this scene. We have all known times when we felt confident about our faith – ready to walk towards Christ on the water - and other times when disaster or danger has brought us up short and we have felt very small and very alone, buffeted by a storm and starting to sink. It's a very human story.

If we meditate on the miracles of Jesus, perhaps even imagining ourselves in the scenes, sometimes we notice different things. One thing struck me this week in re-reading Matthew's account. We tend to think of Peter's attempt to walk on

water in terms of impetuosity and failure. 'Why did he even attempt it? He's not Jesus. He ought to have known better.' And he receives a rebuke: 'You of little faith.' But if we think about the real nature of the rebuke, Matthew certainly records Jesus on several occasions challenging the disciples for being of 'little faith'. But elsewhere he records him encouraging them that to have 'a little faith', even as small as a mustard seed, is enough to move mountains. Perhaps, therefore, the rebuke is a gentle one. For Jesus doesn't say to Peter: 'why did you think you could walk on water?' but 'why did you doubt that you could?'

Jesus knows Peter better than Peter knows himself. From the beginning he tells him he is the rock on which he will build his church. Yet he knows that Peter is prey to the fears that affect all of us when the going gets difficult. He foretells the denial in the courtyard of the high priest. But Jesus knows, too, that Peter is capable of more, and better, than what happened in the courtyard. At the lakeside after the resurrection he restores him with the forgiveness that only Christ can give: 'Feed my sheep'. And the fact that, two thousand years later, I am giving this talk and you are listening to it, shows that Peter did.

Perhaps the point of Matthew's addition to the story is that discipleship is not about running away from difficulty - huddled in the boat with the other disciples - but walking towards it. This is what Christ wants us to do, loving our neighbour unconditionally and doing our part to build his church on the rock that Peter proved to be. We mustn't feel failures if we panic and stumble. It is not easy to hold on to courage in a storm. But this miracle story assures us that Christ will be there to catch us when we fall. The words that Jesus says, even before Peter

steps out of the boat, are for all of us, and for all time: 'Take heart; do not be afraid: I AM.'

For Christians the world over, this story is still powerful. Even if we no longer think of the sea itself in terms of chaos or evil, the notion of the storm still works well as an image for the emotional, mental or spiritual turmoil we all experience at times. Peter did stumble, losing heart and calling out to Jesus to save him, but ultimately he found himself held by Christ. And 'when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.'

This Friday, 14th August, the church commemorates St Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish priest who died on that day in Auschwitz in 1941. A prisoner had escaped from the camp and, in order to discourage further escape attempts, the authorities chose ten men to be starved to death in an underground bunker. One of the men who was initially chosen cried out that he had a wife and children, at which point Kolbe offered to take his place. In the bunker Kolbe led the prisoners in prayer and was the last to survive, so they gave him a lethal injection because they wanted it over. Kolbe is said to have raised his arm and waited calmly for the injection. I wonder if he ever thought of Christ's words: 'Take heart; do not be afraid: I AM.'

Those words can still bring calm to our storms if, however hesitantly, we are able to hold on to the assurance that Jesus 'is who he is': 'Take heart, do not be afraid: I AM.' May it be so for us, eighty years on, in these times of turmoil.

Amen.