

**[Based on the Gospel for today: Matthew 14:22-36]**

"They cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." (Matt.14:26,27) Let's be honest - this is a very awkward miracle, and has given more problems to preachers than probably any other in the New Testament. Although last Sunday's account of the feeding of the 5000 men plus women and children from two fish and five loaves would run it a close second. All sorts of attempts have been made to explain it away. Was it shallow water? Uncertain moonlight? Sand banks near the shore? But most of the disciples were fishermen, on this very same Lake of Galilee, and knew it well. And Peter who no doubt could swim quite well, took such a ducking on this occasion that he nearly drowned. Maybe at times it is easier to accept a simple miracle than to try and explain it away.

The facts are: the ship was in trouble; the disciples were afraid; Jesus was not there. Suddenly Jesus was there, but the only result then was that the disciples became even more terrified, thinking, naturally enough, that they had seen a ghost! Jesus gently rebukes them - now at last all will be well, and they will drift quietly into port. But no. Peter must go and make a great fool of himself - at first trusting Jesus, then panicking and sinking. Yet even in his moment of great danger, Peter proved himself to be a great theologian: he shouted out "Lord, save me!" Basic but sufficient. Jesus saved him and rebuked him and the calm came. And the disciples worshipped Jesus as the Son of God. After all, who else could He be?

Now if we hear or read. this story and merely accept it - or indeed reject it - on a superficial level, we will never derive anything more from it than an argument as to whether such a thing could possibly happen, or whether it is a piece of fanciful writing to illustrate the divinity of Jesus. Such arguments are pointless, and a mere academic exchange of views. Certainly our Lord's disciples saw teaching and an opening up of vision in everything Jesus did, as well as said, and that is how we must receive the Gospel record.

To the Jews of Biblical times, as for many people of the era, the sea was a symbol of malevolent forces, uncontrollable by men, and only God had power over it. As the Psalmist wrote in psalm 65: it is God "who stills the raging of the seas, the roaring of the waves, and the tumult of the people". For Jesus to tread the waves underfoot is clearly an expression of divine power.

Although the Lake or Sea of Galilee is not a large body of water - about 21km long and 11 wide (13miles by 7), a journey to the other side from Capernaum was a venture into foreign territory, fraught with danger from the sudden storms and squalls which sweep down from the hills, and from the dubious reception they might receive from the inhabitants over the other side.

The unspoken allegory presented by Matthew's record of the incident suggests that the disciples' journey across the Lake was a symbol of their future mission as Apostles, a representation of the Church moving out into all the world, beset by persecution, discouragement, and frustration. Don't forget that Matthew set down his Gospel years after the events he describes, when the Church was already suffering persecution. To be the Church was to be in a storm-tossed boat.

And Jesus came to the disciples, treading down the waves and saying: "It is I, have no fear." Much more than a proof of His divine nature, this is a sign that He is present with His Church, His people, even in moments of grave peril;

that He is the Church's - His people's - Saviour; that He overcomes all evil that threatens His people, the Church. All they need do is believe and trust in His saving presence.

Jesus put the challenge to Peter - He simply said "Come". Peter is the example of the disciple, the follower, who starts out in faith and then begins to doubt Jesus' saving presence, and this part of the story illustrates the need of trust in that presence. As Peter realized what was happening and the seemingly impossible situation he was in, his fear overwhelmed him, and he began to sink. "Lord, save me!" And Jesus reached out His hand and caught him, saying; "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Frequently we feel, either as an individual or as the Church, that we are about to be submerged by the chaotic forces surrounding us. Or don't you read the newspapers? The prophets of doom are very vocal, and there are even those who see in the calamities and distresses of our world, the beginning of the end of the ages. May be, but it has all happened over and over before, and no doubt will again. At such times we may feel that nobody understands any more, nobody cares, everything is in chaos. But if we carry on faithfully and trustingly, there comes eventually the realization that God is still there and has been all along. Peace comes again as we hear the words: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Jesus is no more present with us in times of stress and anxiety than He is at any other time - He is always present with us as our saviour. But it is at those times that our faith in Him is tested - and sometimes sorely tested - and then it is that we cry out: "Lord, save me." Perhaps He will say to us: "you of little faith, why did you doubt?" But He will save us.

On a number of occasions recorded in the Gospels when the situation was very serious and when danger and trouble lay ahead, Jesus reassured His disciples by saying to them: "Fear not", or "Be of good cheer", or "Peace be with you". These words of encouragement were much more than just telling them to "Buck up" and be brave whatever happens. How often in radio or television dramas, somebody in dire trouble is assured "Everything is going to be all right"! And you just know it's not. This is hardly the sense in which Jesus reassured His followers. He declared that even in the midst of trouble, they - and of course us later disciples - could find courage and strength and tranquillity in Him. In His farewell talk before His arrest, which was very much a preparation for the perils which lay ahead, and for the trials and temptations and persecutions that being His followers would bring to them, He said: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, such as the world cannot give." And later, "I have told you all this so that in me you may find peace. In this world you will have tribulation - but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (Jn.16,:23

Jesus lived in the midst of constant temptation, constant disappointment, not infrequent danger. Yet in all that, He remained calm and brave and unruffled, because He possessed His own inner peace. Peace of mind and peace of spirit.

That divine heavenly peace Jesus offers to His followers. Our response must be, can only be, that of the disciples: "those in the boat worshipped Him, saying "Truly you are the Son of God."

We Christians should know that peace. Frequently we lose it and fret and panic and fear. Christ comes and rebukes us for our little faith, and encourages us to trust in Him. He stills the storm and brings us to safety. The realization of His ever-present help, and the tranquillity He offers, should lead us again and again to worship, adoration, and the expression of faith, for truly He is the Son of God and our Saviour.

AMEN

[Based on the Gospel passage appointed for today viz. Matthew 15:21-28]

In the Gospel records, the number of contacts which Jesus had with people who were not Jews is very small. There is the Roman centurion, who **pleaded** for healing for his servant; there is the Samaritan woman at the well, from whom Jesus sought a drink of water; there is the Samaritan leper who was the only one to return to thank Jesus for his healing; and there is this Canaanite woman who came seeking the healing of her daughter. There may be one or two others, but the point is, **Jesus' contacts with non-Jews as recorded was minimal.**

In this case, Jesus seems to have been pretty rough on the poor woman. She pleaded: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David: my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." But He did not **answer her a word.** He **said:** "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And she came and knelt before Him, saying: "Lord, help me." To which He replied: "It is not fair to take **the children's bread** and throw it to the dogs." And she was quick to **answer:** "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Then Jesus answered her: "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

To us who have had warnings of the sin of discrimination drummed into our ears for so long, it may **seem** rather shocking - this apparent aloofness in our Lord's attitude to this poor woman. We would surely take it for granted that Jesus would gladly reach out to all and sundry in distress and misery. Didn't He say: "Come to me, ALL who **labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest**"?

The fact is that Jesus' primary mission on earth was to the Jews. They were the people chosen long before by God to be the instruments of His special revelation. They had been prepared down through the ages to receive God-made-Man, God Incarnate, as the culmination of the revelation, and their mission was to teach all nations. Other people had their gods, but they had the One True God. Solomon's great sin was not that he had 700 wives and 300 concubines, but that he allowed them to retain their old heathen gods and set up temples to them.

Gradually non-Jews had been admitted to the religious practices, and the Jews began to understand that their God was for all **mankind.** Isaiah wrote: "The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be His servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant - these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people. Thus says the Lord God." (Is.56:6,7)

But tragically, that was the high point - from then on the Jewish religion began to close down again to exclusivism. When the Exile was over and the Jews began returning home and to rebuild the Temple, they rejected the people of Samaria and Canaan - the Samaritans and the Canaanites - the people who had been left behind and who had married non-Jewish people. To the returning exiles they had compromised the faith, and adulterated the pure heritage. Hundreds of years later, in our Lord's day, there was still enmity and ill-feeling between Jew and Gentile, or non-Jew.

One of the very real and great problems which faced the young Christian Church was how far and on what terms were the privileges of the Gospel to be thrown open to non-Jews. It was not easy to set aside the inbred suspicion and

prejudice - it had been going on for much longer than the Irish Protestant versus Roman Catholic bigotry, and we see how hard that is to overcome! Yet Jesus had said: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all men to myself." ALL men and of course ALL women, and children, of every race and colour, from the four corners of the earth.

St. Paul believed that as the Gospel had been first proclaimed to the Chosen Race and they had, as a race, rejected it, so now he must proclaim it to the Gentiles. And he used the metaphor of a wild olive shoot being grafted onto the tree to replace those broken off. (Rom.11:17) His hope was that the Jews would become aware of what they had lost and jealous of the newcomers, and would hurry to regain acceptance, to be regrafted onto the tree, to regain their inheritance.

As we know, it did not work out that way, apart from a small number of individuals. As a race and as a Church, the Jews are still waiting for the Messiah, whom we know has already come, and whom they rejected. It is not hard to imagine that in the Early Church there might well be some uneasiness still lingering in a worshipping congregation, as former Jew and former Gentile sat side by side. There is a whisper of discrimination in Acts chapter 6, when the first Deacons were chosen and ordained. "The Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution." Perhaps the Jews felt superior to their Gentile neighbours; perhaps the Gentiles suffered an inferiority complex as gatecrashers and late-comers. Several chapters in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles contain incidents and teaching dealing with efforts to help people to realize their equality in the sight of God and as followers of Jesus. It really was a very big problem, bigger perhaps than we might imagine.

So the incident of Jesus and the Canaanite woman would be listened to very carefully when St. Matthew's Gospel was read, because it tells how Jesus Himself dealt with the question. Superficially hearing it, we might be inclined to say that Jesus was a bit tough in dealing, with the poor woman, so desperately worried about her child. There is no disguising the fundamental fact that Jesus' ministry was firstly to the Jews. However this priority did not in any way exclude any foreigner who came into contact with Him. It seems though, and clearly in this case, that Jesus needed to draw out from the person He was dealing with, a firm and clear declaration and conviction of faith; that He was not simply being used. And that of course was what Jesus was doing when He seemed to hold the woman off. The reaction of the disciples to the woman's pleading shows them up in a pretty poor light, and just how far they still had to go to fully understand the way of Christ. "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." The point now being brought out is clear - this Canaanite woman could show the disciples a thing or two about faith! Nothing could put her off. She'll put up with anything to get what she wants and what she believes Jesus could and would supply. So Jesus draws out and strengthens her faith and perseverance before answering her prayer in the way she asks.

This is what is being said to us today too - that while the Church of God and the Kingdom of Heaven is open and welcoming to all comers, of whatever race or colour or country of origin or situation or status: it is the faith of the individual which is the ultimate criterion. All that is required for entry into the Kingdom is faith in God's mercy, and a life lived in conformity with this mercy.

Trust in Christ; rely on Christ; recognise your dependence on Christ; and the flood-gates of His kindness and love are opened to you. "O woman - O man - great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.

**Amen**

[Based on the Gospel for today: Matthew 16:13-20)

"Jesus said to them: But who do you say that I am? Simon Peter answered: You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (16:15,16)

Jesus' time was running out. The forces of the opposition were closing in on Him. It was essential that He should know if there was anyone who even dimly realized who He was. He took the disciples away to the north, to Caesarea Philippi for a time of rest and intimate fellowship and teaching. Then He put the question to them: "What are people saying about me?" They told Him that some said that He was John the Baptist; some that He was Elijah; some that He was Jeremiah; some that He was one or other of the prophets. Reincarnated. So Jesus put the direct question: "What about you: who do you say I am?" And it was Peter who answered: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Then follows the great promise. Jesus said to Peter: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Because this text is often referred to in support of the claim of the Bishop of Rome to be the head of the whole Christian Church - a claim resisted by other parts of the Christian Church, both Eastern and Western, we had better look at that claim before going any further.

Peter was certainly one of the great leaders of the Early Church, but if anyone has a claim to official primacy it would be James the brother of Jesus, for he was the undoubted leader in the Church in Jerusalem, long before the Church was established in Rome. But it is the unanimous tradition of the Early Church that Peter eventually went to Rome, probably about 61AD, and that he was martyred there. Rome was then the foremost city of that part of the world - of the whole world to those who were part of the Roman Empire - and naturally the Christian leader or bishop was given high status, once Christianity became accepted and legalized. That status was enhanced when Rome was threatened by invaders from Central Europe - the Emperor fled to Constantinople, but the Bishop of Rome stayed and retained Rome's reputation as the centre of the Christian world. Incidentally, the Bishops of Constantinople felt that as their city was now the home of the Roman Emperor, they should be the Church's chief bishops, and in due course this led to the breach between the Eastern and Western Churches in AD 1054, even though by this time the original causes of the dispute were in the dim past. Another example of the unity of the Church and Christendom being broken by the frailty of men, and their desire for earthly power and status.

As in Apostolic times, when the Church was formed as a series of localised self-governing units - the Church in Corinth, the Church in Galatia, the Church in Ephesus, the Church in Philippi, and so on, so today this is the way in which the Anglican Communion is organised. The Lambeth Conferences, held every 10 years, are attended by bishops of 24 self-governing Churches of the Anglican Communion, all acknowledging the primacy or leadership of the Church of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury. But whatever decisions that Conference makes, none are binding on the Anglican Church of Australia, or the Church in Wales, or the Anglican Church of Canada, or the Episcopal Church of the United States of America, or of the Anglican Communion in Japan, or any other of the independent Churches of the Anglican Communion. Each must accept for itself the recommendations made, but of course when such a conference comes to agreement, it would be a very foolish section of the Church which chooses to go against it or to ignore it. That appears to be the way the Apostolic Church worked; that is how the Anglican Church is organised today.

Well, after that historical digression, let's get back to our Lord's words to Peter. What did He mean? When Jesus said: "On this rock I will build my Church", we believe that He meant, not Peter as a person - although the Greek word for Peter is Petros, and for rock, petra - but the statement of faith made by Peter: "You are the Messiah the Son of the living God." This is the foundation stone, the rock, on which the Church is built.

The Church, in St. Matthew's writing of the Gospel, is the comparatively small community of Jesus' disciples, who came together to learn of Him and to worship Him. The Church is not, of course, the kingdom of Heaven, since God's Word which constitutes His rule, is operative in the hearts of everyone, whether they belong to the Church or not. Neither is the Kingdom of Heaven the Church, since all who accept God's ruling are not visibly united in service and worship. But the Church is the beginning, the introduction, of the Kingdom of Heaven visible here on earth.

Jesus did not say: "You are Peter and on you I will build my Church", but "... and on this rock I will build my Church." It was not on Peter as a person, but on the faith stated by Peter that Jesus would build His Church. It was surely not to Peter as a person, even as a leader of the Church, that Jesus promised the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and authority to bind or to loose on earth - an authority which would be recognised in Heaven. Rather it was to the Church represented by Peter and the faith which he expressed. Later on in this Gospel, in chapter 18, we find that Jesus gave that same authority to loose and to bind to all the apostles, explicitly. And because the apostles were the Church, we take it that this authority was given not merely to a group of contemporary men, but to the Church as the earthly instrument and expression of the Word of God. The Church is called "the Body of Christ" for that reason. Jesus promised that "the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." And He has kept that promise. For by earthly standards, and by gross disobedience to the will of God by members of the Church down through the ages, the Church should have perished long ago. But while some parts of the Church err, at the same time other parts remain true, and overall, the Church has remained faithful.

The question Jesus asked the disciples was put to them though as individuals - not as a group, not as the Church. "Who do you say that I am?" The Church is made up of individual people who say from the heart "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And although in the Creed we say as a body of Christians: "WE believe .... ", it is as an individual member that we hold our faith. Real, active, visible acceptance of that faith shows day by day in the life of the Christian - not merely by what he says, but by how he lives is the rock upon which Christ's Church is built. For this is not a club or a society to which we belong; this is the beginning of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. WE are the Body of Christ, and His Spirit IS with us.

**AMEN**

From Romans 12, verse 21: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

And from St. Matthew, chapter 16, verse 26: "What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" Or as another version puts it: "forfeits their soul." Together they present a message overlooked today by the majority of people, and probably most of us forget it too at times.

We do allow ourselves to be taken over by the cares and worries and fads and fancies of this world from time to time - we do become conformed to this world. We become like sheep and follow the lead of what everybody else seems to be doing. We conform to the world's standards almost without realising it. And then when we do wake up to what is happening, and perhaps what we have become, it's too late and we cannot bring ourselves to change or break away. So all unwittingly we become part of the permissive society. All too often it is too hard to stand alone.

A story might illustrate the point. A weed, previously unknown in a certain rural district, began to appear with increasing regularity in the area. It was noted and listed with the Noxious Weeds Control Board, which meant it was an offence to have it growing on a property. In such a situation as many of you know, the Control Board can order the owner of the property to eradicate the weed, or the Board has the power to move in, eradicate the weed themselves and charge the owner accordingly. However this weed was uncontrollable, no matter what steps were taken, and so it became easier and less embarrassing to remove it from the Noxious Weeds list than it was to enforce the law. It was the same weed and it was doing just as much, if not more harm than it had originally, but it had beaten the authorities and was out of control. Those who cared about their properties, and depended on the land for their livelihood, continued to battle with the harm this weed was doing; those who had never cared didn't change and were no help at all. ....

This principle is at work in our society today.

Take the arguments about the legalisation of the non-medical use of drugs. It may well come about that marijuana may be taken off the Illegal Drugs list. You might feel that this does not affect you because you do not smoke pot - but be assured it will affect our society indirectly, if not directly. Surely it is not sufficient reason to say that because alcohol and nicotine - potentially dangerous to health and safety - are legal, then marijuana should be equally legal to use! To claim that by taking it off the Illegal Drugs list because that will stop some of the drug traffic is ridiculous. The drug traffic simply becomes open and available to a wider consumerism.

And this is the same sort of reasoning behind the loosening of laws on abortion, gambling, prostitution, pornography: they have become acceptable to a large section of the community. But does that make them right? "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

To be a follower of Christ means standing up for the standard called for by Christ. The problem is that this is not a very popular thing, and by and large we are not terribly brave when our friends might laugh at us and call us religious cranks. It's all right for clergymen to say this kind of thing and write to the papers about it

because by definition they are religious cranks - it is their job. But how tremendous the effect would be if every Christian wrote in protest or rang up to complain about some obnoxious T.V. programme, or blasphemous article in a newspaper, or trend in social behaviour. If the telephone switchboards were jammed and the mail bags had to be carted in on trolleys! After all, it is only a noisy shrill minority which is pushing society along paths it doesn't really want to go. Unless society makes a stand it soon becomes conformed, and takes for granted social ills - people complaining only when they themselves are affected. '

A few years ago the Festival of Light organisation was very vocal in opposition to things they saw as evils in society. To many people their style was too aggressive and too puritanical, and they did not win wide support. But they made their protest felt, and the torrent of abuse which they drew indicates how feared they were by the apostles of evil. They have gone very quiet lately - have they caved in under all the pressure of opposition?

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This is an individual thing. As each person must answer "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" for him- or herself when the question is put: "Who do you say that I am?", so each individual disciple must take up his own individual cross if he is to follow Christ; must be prepared to stand firm in the face of temptations to conform to the world's standards.

Following Jesus is more than a matter of accepting His teaching. It is also fashioning one's whole life after His. Being His disciple means sharing His Spirit in all the conditions and circumstances of one's life. Jesus did not merely suffer and die for us vicariously, that is, in our place, but also in order to give us an example. Jesus met His cross by simply being faithful to the Father's will. Similarly the disciple does not have to do anything extraordinary to meet his cross. All he has to do is remain faithful to his Father in all the details of his life. The disciple is not invited simply to carry his cross - but to take it up! And this is not self-denial in a spirit of stoic, dutiful, resignation and abstinence from pleasure, but a joyful freely-given denial of self, the putting aside the demands of self in the glad service of God and His people. "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.", doesn't necessarily refer to mortality, as the verse following shows: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"

This is the answer to the person who never goes to church, never worships God, but professes to be a Christian because he never does anyone any harm. Apart from a natural doubt about that claim, we would hardly be likely to see such a person denying himself and taking up his cross. Those who make that sort of claim are often quite selfish and self-centred, and just not prepared to set the pleasures of the world aside to serve God in every aspect of daily living.

What a wonderful formula for living the Christian life St. Paul gives us in today's extract from his letter to the Christians of Rome: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection ..... Bless those who persecute you ... Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another ..... Do not repay anyone evil for evil ..... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

And then our Lord's promise: "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done." **AMEN**