1 Kings 19: 9-18; Romans 10: 5-15

**Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew** (14:22-33)

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’

Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’

**This is the gospel of the Lord …**

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

There is a story about one of those parishes where they post service details and Biblical quotes and things on a big board outside the church building. They were advertising the coming weeks and the notice read: This week: Jesus walks on water, and Coming soon: Searching for Jesus.

Apocryphal, I’m sure.

However, there is an entirely true story about Bagshot Park, built within Windsor Great Park, for use as a hunting lodge by Charles the first, which was demolished and rebuilt sometime in the 19th century, then requisitioned by the Army in the Second World War for use as a Staff College. In 1946 [King George VI](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_George_VI) offered the house to the [Royal Army Chaplains' Department](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Army_Chaplains%27_Department) to be used as a centre for admin and training. The Army Chaplains subsequently relocated, and in 1997 the Earl and Countess of Wessex took over the tenancy. The Army Chaplains had, though, famously had a notice by the pond which read *Please do not walk on the water*. The original sign was removed when the chaplains left, but a new one was made, given to the Earl and Countess, and duly placed, we are given to understand, at the edge of the pond.

Enough frivolity. Here we have Matthew’s story on Jesus walking on water – the only gospel version which includes Peter doing the same.

I talked a bit last week about Matthew’s context – engaging with life for the early church; and that included living with the threat of persecution and the reality of evil in the world.

We can read the story straight and talk about what it says about faith, but we can also view it with a wider lens. If we zoom out a bit, the evil and chaos in the world might be represented by the stormy waters – and there is a sense in which the disciples were travelling through those stormy waters – and we today are doing likewise.

The story began with the information that Jesus sent the disciples off in the boat to go ahead of him to the other side. They were on a journey across the unsteady bit towards solid ground – and again the imagery is clear. It reminds me a bit of psalm 23, where the psalmist talks about going through the Valley of the shadow of Death. It is not a scary place to be, since we are not staying there; we are simply journeying through it to get to the promise at the other end, as it were.

Now if we zoom back in, we can imagine the scene: the boat is battling a head wind, going up and down, and waves are breaking over the sides. The disciples are wet and cold and anxious.

But then Jesus – who is the antithesis of all that storminess, the very personification of calm – appears, walking towards them on the water. And not just a few steps, note, because we are told that night had fallen, and Jesus was entirely alone when he had finished talking to the crowds and sending them on their way home. The boat was a long way from land.

And seeing what they are seeing, the disciples immediately decide they are seeing a ghost and are scared; until Jesus speaks. At which point, Peter decides that this is an opportunity for him to go and meet Jesus.

Only Matthew weaves these two strands together; a measure of the significance of Peter for Matthew. And Peter, as the dedication of this church, has particular significance for us too.

So Peter climbs out of the boat – no easy feat itself if it is rocking badly – and receives, as it were, a share of Jesus’ power, in that he too is now walking on the water. Pretty well all the way to Jesus. But what happens? He takes his eyes off Jesus, notices how blowy it is and starts sinking.

We almost can’t take this analogy too far. Think of all the circumstances when you have taken your eye off the job and messed it up, put an ugly ink blot on the page, hit your finger with the hammer, whatever …

But at the last second, Peter at least has the presence of mind to say: Lord, help me. And Jesus takes hold of him. Presumably, they then walk together the remaining distance. Scripture doesn’t tell us, but there is no unseemly scramble back into the boat mentioned: Jesus took hold of Peter, gave him that little lecture about You of little faith and only then are we told about what happened when they got into the boat. Which was that the storm stopped altogether.

Notice though that Jesus doesn’t berate Peter for having no faith; he is robust, but encouraging. Peter has faith, but it is very small. Think mustard seeds; as we did fairly recently.

I know I harp on a bit about how this whole chaos and trouble thing relates to our own times, but here we are again: the institutional church is going on and on about too few priest and too little money, and about the concern that people, having got used to worshiping online, might not bother coming back into the buildings. Crisis seems to diminish what little faith we have – even among the higher echelons of the church. But Jesus is saying: Come on, people; keep your eyes on **me,** and you will ride this storm out and reach the other side of this chaos or evil or however you see it.

And all this relates very closely to Christ calling Peter: the Rock – and on this rock will I build my church. You wouldn’t surely found a bank or an accountancy firm on someone who has dyscal**’cul**ia, would you? That’s the number equivalent of dyslexia. Yet Jesus does found the church on Peter. His little bit of faith is enough for now. Because the foundations of the church – the whole body of us – are wrought out of the experiences of moving through storms and still managing to keep our eyes on Jesus. The whole Body of Christ is blessed by the deeper and stronger faith that results from these trials.

And Peter’s experience is instructive to us for three reasons:

First, that he sees Jesus – and recognises that he is not a ghost or a figment of imagination.

Second, that he steps out in his little faith, overcoming his fear, and

Thirdly, that he sinks. There is not a standard there that is so high we can’t hope to get near it.

There is that fabulous passage in an earlier part of Romans about suffering producing endurance, and endurance producing character, and character producing hope. I know that is easy for me to say, when I am not facing hardship or unemployment as some of you are, but I am not only hopeful, but also believing, that we can and will get through these tricky bits and come out the other side understanding a bit more about faith and about our own relationship with God. …

We are not in charge.

**Amen**