

Trinity IX 2020 Year A *(Proper 14/19 OT)*

Walking on water *And Jesus went up the mountain by himself to pray (Matthew 14:23)*

Today's Old Testament and Gospel readings are both well-known and vivid accounts regarding faith – and both concern listening and responding to God's call.

Elijah has carried out his task of showing the Israelites the futility of worshipping other gods who simply aren't there. He has made the prophets of Baal look like idiots, before causing God's fire to devour his prepared sacrifice as a sign to the assembled company of the one, true God. Then through his prayer he intercedes with God to break the drought which has afflicted the land, and this is too successful. But then.... he is frightened by Queen Jezebel and runs off longing for death. God continues to show abundant patience with him, feeding him in the wilderness. Making his way to the Holy Mountain, Elijah still feels an utter helplessness in regard to his situation. And it is here that he experiences the fulness of the Divine Presence in his life. This revelation is not shown in the mighty rushing wind -strong enough to split mountains, nor in the earthquake or terrifying fire which follows. It is in the sound of sheer silence that Elijah encounters God – or, as the King James' Bible puts it more picturesquely, in *a still small voice*. Elijah covers his face in the presence of God and his doubts and fears are quelled as he experiences this unity with the Divine Stillness. Moses too, in an earlier encounter with God at Sinai – had veiled his face in the presence of God.

This response by both Moses and Elijah reminds us of the Transfiguration, when Peter, James, and John experience the divine confirmation when Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus - the embodiment of God's presence in the midst of our humanity.

In the Gospel reading, we hear of another part of the disciples' faith journey. At this point, Jesus has just shown the abundance of his compassion in the feeding of the Five Thousand. He then sends all away because he desires to be alone with his Father in prayer.

Meanwhile, the disciples are in their boat crossing to the other side of Galilee, but, as so often happens on that inland sea, it quickly becomes stormy. The boat is battered by waves and their lives seemed threatened when Jesus walks towards them across the water. They are terrified – *'It is a ghost!'* is their cry. But Jesus calls to them – *'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'* It is Peter who responds: *'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.'* Jesus utters one word *'Come.'* The seemingly impossible is achieved, but Peter becomes distracted by the waves and starts to sink. *'Lord, save me,'* is his cry. Jesus immediately reaches out his hand to hold him and offers these simple words – one could barely call them a rebuke - *'You of little faith, why did you doubt.'*

Just imagine that feeling of sinking beneath the water. As I describe in the New Letter this week, I vividly remember such a moment. When I was a child, a great summer treat was a visit to the 'Banks' near the village in which I grew up. Devoran overlooked Restronguet Creek, a tributary of Carrick Roads, itself an estuary of the River Fal. It's a very beautiful situation, and the 'Banks' consisted of a spit of land formed by two streams running down on either side. It is largely tidal, and so when the water is out, other than the streams, there is little but acres of mud. However, there we would take our picnics and spend the day

waiting for the water to come in, or watching it go out. Simple pleasures – how things have changed!

My cousins and I, together with another boy, decided to take ourselves off to the Banks for a watery time. I can't believe that my parents were aware of our outing, because only our friend could swim. How clearly I remember his pushing me in the water completely out of my depth together with the sensation that I was utterly unable to stay above the surface and couldn't feel the bottom. In other words, I was powerless to rescue myself from the possibility of drowning. Fortunately, David (the boy) quickly realised and hauled me to the bank. You will be glad to hear that I can now swim, albeit in a laboured way, but it was a terrifying experience for a child – that feeling of being unable to help one's self in a moment of danger - being out of depth in a particular situation.

Let's take the story of Peter further. Perhaps the real point of this account is to show that trusting and seeking to deepen that trust in the compassion of a loving Saviour is all-important to a person of faith. The other disciples are terrified of this figure moving towards them, but it is Peter who shows faith by asking who it is. In other words, he speaks to the Lord before seeking to do anything. Nor did he rush to climb out of the boat but waited for Jesus' response. Peter didn't just assume that he could walk on water. He waited to hear the voice of the Lord and having heard it immediately sought to respond. Note that it is not through *his* power that he is able to walk on water, but only through faith in Jesus. We are led even further, because we see that when this faith is assailed by stormy waves, Peter cries out to Jesus, who immediately reaches out and lifts him above the waves. Translating this to everyday life, in any situation, we are assured that if we approach God and seek to know the never-failing divine presence and stillness we have the rock on which we are able to build our lives.

Elijah experienced a mighty storm, earthquake, and fire before he could hear that still, small voice. Peter whilst hearing the still, small voice, 'Come,' was nevertheless almost overwhelmed when he lost sight of Jesus when distracted by the waves. Each one of us will sometimes be like Elijah or Peter; overwhelmed by life or hanging on to faith tenuously. It can seem like a struggle to understand that in Jesus, Emmanuel – God is with us. No 'ifs,' no 'buts.' God never fails those who respond to the knowledge of this presence. What matters is our ability to listen to that still small voice. In the noise and bustle of modern life (even during a pandemic), it is so easy to fill every moment of the day with seemingly important tasks or amusements. I am as capable of that as anyone! Yet all of us, without exception and regardless of age, need the space to hear God's call and unite ourselves to his love through Jesus Christ. As Charles Wesley wrote: *'Infinite, unexhausted Love! Jesus and Love are one.'*

We do not need an earthquake, storm or fire, but merely the ability to hear the voice of the Lord who says to us 'Come.' By seeking to centre our lives on Jesus, we allow Him to support us in all that we seek to be and do. That, my dear friends, is how we really can walk on water! Amen.



Marc Chagall – All Saints, Tudeley.

The window (installed 1967) is a memorial tribute to Sarah d'Avigdor-Goldsmid who died aged just 21 in a sailing accident off Rye. Sarah was the daughter of Sir Henry and Lady d'Avigdor-Goldsmid; who lived nearby. The church has a complete set of Chagall windows gradually installed until 1985, the year of Chagall's death at the age of 98.

1 Kings 19: 9-18

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' Then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.'

Romans 10: 5-15

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) 'or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'

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.'