

Reading: Matthew 14:22 – 33

Date: August 9

Rising above the chaos



The symbol of the World Council of Churches is the little boat with a cross for the mast. The little boat that recalls all the stories on the Sea of Galilee with Jesus in a little boat. The little boat that Jesus sat in to teach the crowds when their eagerness left him no room on the beach. The little boat that let him cross the sea to minister to the people in Gentile territory. And the little boat that got tossed by storms and threatened by waves. The little boat full of disciples that generations have identified with as the church. And right now, we can identify with every struggling oar stroke in Matthew's story, as the disciples try to battle across the sea against the wind. When this church was built 95 years ago, it probably felt like the little boat by the shore, with Jesus teaching the crowds. But the last 40 years have had headwinds and now it feels like the third watch of the night. People lured away by a flashy, prosperous world. Scientific philosophy turning people away from myths and spirituality. The perception of old, outdated morality and some very hypocritical and criminal behaviour by church leaders. And now, a virus has shut us down! Battered by the waves, for the wind was against them. And Jesus came walking on the sea, trampling down the very waves that were battering them.

Right from the beginning of scripture – the stories of creation – the sea has been the symbol of chaos, of things beyond control. Maybe this was because the Israelites were landlubbers and one of their biggest enemies, the Philistines, were sea people. Or maybe it was a deep memory that the water of the Red Sea, that they crossed, drowned the Egyptians. Whatever the reason, the sea is dangerous, the sea is chaos, the sea is unpredictable and uncontrollable. And so, quite naturally, all that symbolic understanding carries over into the Christian church. Not just in personal faith, like Psalm 69, where people can feel like they are drowning in trouble. The struggles of the disciples on the sea become the metaphor for the struggles of the early church to survive and grow in the Roman Empire. Accusations and rumours; that Christians were atheists because they didn't follow the gods, that they were cannibals because they ate flesh and drank blood, that they were traitors because they refused military service or that they were criminals because they kept talking about death on a cross. Battered by the waves, for the wind was against them. And Jesus came walking on the sea, trampling down the very waves that were battering them.

We identify with this story of the storm battered boat of disciples because the church has always identified with this story. It is not just because it is Jesus coming to the aid of the disciples, but because this is Jesus coming to the aid of disciples obediently struggling on a journey they were sent on by him. We identify with this story because Jesus has always come to the aid of the struggling, faithful, weather battered church. And, as people of the resurrection, I hope we can do a better job of recognising Jesus when he comes to our aid than those fearful disciples on the Sea of

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Galilee! The wind may be against us and the waves may be tossing us around, but the central core of our faith says that Jesus is walking with us, even on the storm-tossed sea. Do not be afraid, I am with you. The wind will not stop us from following the mission that Jesus has sent us on. The waves will not sink the boat. With Jesus, this chaos we are fighting against will not prevail. That is the faith that drives us on.

That is the story of Jesus walking on the sea as we have it in Mark and John; Matthew takes it one big step further, Peter walks on the sea! Where some might see impetuous Peter, speaking before he thinks and then putting his foot in it – figuratively and literally – Matthew wants us to see something more. We are not really on mission if we stay in the boat!

In one of CS Lewis's Narnia stories, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, the characters find themselves in Narnia aboard a small ship sailing to find seven lost lords. Complaining about the ship being tossed around by the waves, Eustice tries to tell the Narnians that in his world there were ships so big that you could hardly tell you were at sea. To which the captain replies, "In that case you may as well stay on shore!"

The World Council of Churches may see the church as a small boat, but throughout the centuries the church has built cathedrals like castles and talked of sanctuary and security. And against that concept of the church as a place to hide from the chaos of life, Peter steps out of the boat! "If you, Lord, command me, I will do it". Peter stepping out of the boat tells us that faith can let us rise from seeing the church as a refuge to seeing the church as a resource for mission. You may feel that the world surrounding the church is chaotic and out of control, but in Christ, we can rise above the chaos. Faith is more than setting to sea in a small boat, with Christ we can walk on the waves that seem so threatening.

An American pastor, speaking at a conference on the church in crisis said, "the reason we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it." Step out of the boat. Keeping your eyes on Jesus instead of the wind can strengthen your confidence to talk about your faith, build your courage to offer love and care for those in need, or insight to switch the conversation from the failures of church leaders to the faithfulness of volunteers or the possibilities of community. Keeping your eyes on Jesus can allow you to not just welcome Jesus as a way to calm the storm and allow the boat to reach land safely, it can give you the faith to step out of the boat.

The news seems to get worse every day, the effect on the church of this shut down – financially and spiritually – seems to be getting worse each day, and people's mental and spiritual health seems to be getting worse each day, and it really does feel like it's dark and we have been rowing against the wind and the tide all night. And the collective cry of the church is "Come, Lord Jesus". Come, and calm the storm, come, and help us to do your mission of love to the world, come, and give us some respite from struggling. Come, and give us the strength to get out of the boat and help people. Come, Lord Jesus, because we are not getting anywhere on our own. Come, and help us to rise above this threatening chaos. And Jesus replies, "Do not be afraid, I am with you, why do you doubt?"

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