

Pentecost 10 9<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Matthew 14.22-36

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

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### ***'The stormy waters of consciousness'***

Because this gospel we heard tonight is commonly referred to as a 'miracle story', I want to start with a brief comment about how we read miracle stories.

One way of reading miracle stories is the literal level of historical narrative. I call this 'time machine' reading. That is, if I were to go back in a time machine I would see things occurring exactly as the story presents them. So for example, in a time machine reading of the story of Jonah, I would see Jonah literally being swallowed by a big fish and being spat on the shore three days later. Or in the case of today's story, I would see Jesus literally walking across the water. If we read the story this way then we will probably understand it as saying that 'Jesus is God and is therefore able to things that we can't. His walking on water proves he is God'. That is certainly one key way the story has been told and understood through Christian history.

But a literal, time machine, reading of the Bible is not the only way, or even the predominant way, that the Bible has been read by the church. Throughout history scripture can and has been read in at least four different, although often interrelated ways:

- **1.Literal** – which I have just described – which we might call a time-machine reading
- **2.Analogical** – where one thing paints a visual picture of something else. When Jesus says to Peter – you are a ROCK – he is not saying that Peter is made of stone. He is saying that Peter, or Peter's confession of faith has a kind of rock like solidity to it
- **3.Moral** – where the story directs us towards ethical living
- **4. Mystical (anagogical)**– where the story points us to something beyond ourselves – to the coming Kingdom of God

There are many other ways of listening for the Word of God in scripture, but these four were already widely in use in the early church from the 1<sup>st</sup> century and, of course, shaped the way the authors of the biblical texts tried to communicate the truth of who Jesus is.

The great preacher, William Barclay proposes that miracle stories should be read not as something that God did as a 'once off' in history but as pointing to something that God is doing in every moment of history, including in our lives today.

This invites us into a richer reading of scripture in which we open ourselves to how God might use a text to reveal God's self to us today. Reading in this way can even have a certain creative playfulness to it. One the American poet Laurettes Billy Collins, described how he tried to get his students to read poetry using their imaginations. This is what he says:

*I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a colour slide  
or press an ear against its hive.*

*I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,*

***or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.***

***I want them to water-ski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.  
But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.***

***They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.***

Colins, B. 1988, *The Apple that Astonished Paris*. University of Arkansas Press cited at [http://www.cstone.net/~poems/intro\\_lo.htm](http://www.cstone.net/~poems/intro_lo.htm)

So let's return to this story about Jesus walking on water. What if didn't try to beat it with a hose to try to find out whether Jesus defied the laws of physics, or whether the laws of physics are actually only approximate descriptions of reality, or whether this story is a proof text that Jesus is the Son of God, or whether in fact it just proves that Christians are prone to believe six impossible things before breakfast [Alice in Wonderland].

What we played with the text metaphorically like we try to listen to one of our dreams – which is 100% true and yet takes a bit of mining into to discern what God is saying through it. We could ask questions, like:

- Given that the *sea* in the Old Testament is often used as a symbol for chaos – how are we experiencing chaos in our world right now?
- Given that being on a *small boat in a stormy sea* can be incredibly dangerous (think of the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race), where are we experiencing danger in our lives right now?
- Given that water is often a symbol in dreams for the *unconscious*, how do sometimes experience our own psyche's as chaotic, threatening, confused, tumultuous?
- What's it like being in the *company of companions in a small boat*, "all in this together" being tossed and thrown about – locked up in a tiny space?
- And then what is it like to *fix our eyes on Jesus* who suddenly and surprisingly shows up in the midst of all this? Do we stay cowering in the boat being tossed about to and fro, or do we, like Peter, impulsively and with little regard for the consequences simply step onto the water of chaos, reaching out our hands towards Jesus, as Jesus calls to us to come to him? Could this act of stepping out of the boat be like saying our Prayer Word - a simple act of faith....as the ancient monks prayed – 'O God make speed to save us; O Lord make haste to help us'? (John Cassian: Conferences (10)

And, of course, as anyone who has meditated knows, it won't be long before the chaotic sea of the psyche tries to overwhelm us. Once again, we return to our prayer, "Lord Save me" , and once again Jesus takes hold of us, and then wind falls and things become calm as we touch on that deeper substratum of peace, which is Jesus's indwelling presence in the boat with us. This is contemplative prayer as a small act of faith on our part and a sign of God's faithfulness to us on Gods part.