

# Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus

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*A sermon given on the Ninth Sunday of Trinity, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2020, by the Curate, the Revd Tim Kelly in the Minster.*

*Matthew 14:22-33*

One of the things that I have been doing a little more of during lockdown is cooking and preparing meals. As I've heard some others in the congregation remark on our coffee and chat zoom calls, I think we are all, as a family, getting a little bit fed up of the same meals over and over again. Cooking and even eating has become a bit of a chore. We've also been trying to eat a little bit more healthfully, and a new cookbook has helped a great deal. Most interestingly for me, has been discovering new flavour and taste combinations like halloumi cheese and spinach, passionfruit and hazelnut and coriander and coconut milk. Suddenly, food and cooking have become more fun, having discovered these new flavour combinations.

In today's gospel passage, we hear of a classic combination that I'm sure many of us have tasted: faith and doubt, or depending upon your mixing quantities, perhaps it's doubt with a dash of faith. There's perhaps no other story of the disciples and Jesus in the Gospels that so pointedly captures what it can feel like and be like on the Christian journey of faith. So let's look at Peter.

So often I'm glad of the example of Peter when I'm reading the Bible. Why? Because he's far from perfect. He can be clumsy. The Gospels hold some good examples of Peter's 'foot in mouth'. He says things that he sometimes regrets, on occasion very serious things such as his denial of knowing Jesus. He can be reckless. He often acts first and thinks a little bit later. But despite him getting things wrong, the thing that makes him so relatable, Jesus can clearly see his underlying heart, his motivation and his intention, despite his fallibilities and failings, it's Peter he chooses upon whom to build his church.

In today's Gospel reading, the disciples initial shock of having seen a ghost turned into recognition of it being Jesus walking on the water towards them. But for Peter, mere recognition isn't enough. He wants to be 'like' Jesus. He wants to 'do' what Jesus is doing, and he wants to 'be' where Jesus is. Reckless or 'faith-filled'; impetuous, or is he the only one of the disciples at that point who is, just for one quick moment, completely unencumbered by the concerns of the world around him, and is relying totally upon following Jesus. Peter's faith in that moment rivets his attention on the master who says,

"Come". We're talking about pure, unadulterated, uncontaminated ingredients here: faith with an extra splash of faith on top.

Now, if we were to paint Peter as reckless, how would we describe the other disciples in the boat? Sensible chaps? They can see that this is a potentially dangerous situation: they're in the middle of a storm; there are treacherous waves; no need to do anything rash, now; I'm sure we 'could' walk on water if we needed to, but best 'not' to put that to the test. It's perhaps much easier to see why inaction would be the preferred option.

When are 'we' the ones in the boat, victims of analysis-paralysis, rather than letting our faith guide us out onto the potentially choppy waters? Now, the boat-based risk-assessing, risk-calculating disciples may have thought that their course of action had been proved perfectly correct when, after Peter's first few steps on the water, he started to sink. Peter's risky attempt has failed. But what exactly had gone wrong? Peter's gaze, Peter's attention that had been so riveted upon Jesus, has turned instead to the water, to the waves. In my ingredient analogy, pure faith becomes faith with a growing hint of doubt mixed in. Peter, in fact, has become more like the disciples in the boat. "What am I doing? This is surely impossible." Looking at the waves rather than at Jesus. It surely seems like a fair conclusion that this 'is' impossible and failure is inevitable.

Now, if that were the end of the story, the moral of the story would be very simple: 'Don't try anything that Jesus commands that seems impossible. If it seems impossible, it is.' But that wasn't the end. Jesus reaches down into the waters and pulls Peter out. He was there. He was always there, even when Peter forgot he was there. This is surely something we must never forget: Jesus's presence is our assurance. And although some may regard Jesus's words to Peter as purely a rebuke, there are two important features to point out. Firstly, Jesus recognises the faith that Peter had: little, maybe, but faith nevertheless. Second, Jesus notably didn't say, "Why couldn't you be more like the others back in the boat? Why on earth did you think you could walk on water?" Instead, he encourages Peter by saying, "Why did you ever doubt that you could?"

Now, this morning, you may find yourself in the middle of a storm. The waves may look considerable from where you're standing. And in that combination of faith and doubt, you may feel like doubt is winning, and the impossible steps in front of you seem just that - impossible. But today's gospel reading reminds us yet again, Jesus is with us. The very moment we may be tempted to give up like Peter, is when help is just a step away.

So don't let your focus be the waves all around you, but instead let Jesus's gaze and command to walk, capture again your attention. 'Turn your eyes upon Jesus', as it says in the words of that hymn:

*'Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
Look full in his wonderful face,  
All the things of Earth will grow strangely dim  
In the light of his glory and grace.*

# Reading Text

Matthew 14:22-33

<sup>22</sup> Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup> And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup> but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup> And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. <sup>26</sup> But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup> But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' <sup>28</sup> Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' <sup>29</sup> He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' <sup>31</sup> Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you <sup>doubt?</sup><sup>32</sup> When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup> And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'