

# The Lord of all Creation ...

*... who bids us, "Come"*

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*A sermon given on the Tenth Sunday of Trinity, 13th August 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*Matthew 14:22-33*

I wonder, what are you most afraid of or anxious about? When I was a child, I had a real phobia about snakes, and for this I blame my older brother, who used to keep grass snakes as pets and was quite creative in finding places to keep them. So whenever I unzipped a pencil case or opened the sock drawer, I was never entirely confident that I was only going to find pencils or socks. That's a relatively harmless fear. The only snakes in Beverley Minster are the stone dragons carved into some of the capitals. But many of us are having to cope day by day with fears that are much more paralysing - many of us are facing circumstances that can feel overwhelming: fear that we may not be able to afford to pay rising bills; fear that we may not be able to cope with the demands made of us at work; anxiety of what we may learn when we go to the doctors for the results of those tests; fear of having to meet and deal with that difficult neighbour or colleague who makes our life a misery. We are surrounded by the storms of life, with all kinds of towering waves and gusts of wind threatening to knock us off course or to overturn our little boat. Many people live in a near constant state of anxiety and fear.

So what about you? What are you most afraid of?

In this morning's Gospel reading, the disciples have every reason to be afraid. They're in a boat at night and the wind is against them and the waves are battering the boat and the journey is taking them much longer than it should have done. It wouldn't have been surprising to learn that the disciples feared for their physical safety. But in actual fact, they are not afraid of the storm or of being lost, or of the boat sinking. What really terrifies them is seeing Jesus, because as they see him coming towards them, walking across the water, they think he's a ghost.

I don't know what your line on ghosts might be, whether you believe in ghosts or not, whether you have ever seen a ghost or just enjoy the odd ghost story, but the point here about mistaking Jesus for a ghost is that ghosts, mysterious though they may be, are part of the created universe. However inexplicable or uncanny or supernatural ghosts might be, at the end of the day, they are part of the cosmos that God has made. It's a bit like all the carvings here in Beverley Minster, carvings of demons and dragons and green men with foliage coming out of

their mouths. Sometimes our more imaginative guides tell visitors that these are the remnants of a pre-Christian paganism, a paganism still secretly followed by the masons who carved them into a Christian building in order to be quietly subversive of this new-fangled Christianity. The truth, of course, is that the church authorities who paid for these carvings knew perfectly well what was going on - they didn't write out blank cheques for the masons to carve whatever they liked - the point of all these carvings of angels and demons and grotesque faces is to show that they are all part of God's created universe. And if the church building represents all of creation, then the good and the evil are all part of it. Everything that exists, good or bad, clear and understandable or mysterious and puzzling, all of it exists under God. There is nothing that exists outside the realm of God's creation and sovereignty. And if ghosts do exist, then ghosts themselves are part of God's world. And one of the reasons why ghosts are scary is because they can't be trusted. Are they friendly or hostile? Into what category should we put them - heaven or hell?

In some of the resurrection stories, the disciples at first think that the risen Jesus is a ghost, and again we're told that they were startled and terrified - because ghosts can't be relied upon. And when you're in a small boat, in a storm, on a lake and everything feels out of control, the last thing you need is a ghost turning up. If you want a safe way of bringing an unpredictable situation back under control, then ghosts won't be at the top of your wish list.

So the point of this story is to get us asking who or what is Jesus Christ? In an uncertain world full of risks and dangers, can he be trusted? Is he just a special man who is as much a victim of changing fortunes as you or I? Is he a ghost who can play tricks, who can walk on water and from whom we would do well to keep our distance? Or is he the Lord of creation, the one who has authority over the wind and the waves, who can walk over the waters like the Spirit of God moving over the waters of chaos in the creation story in Genesis; the one who can be trusted because in the end, everything that exists, including everything that threatens our well being, is not only subject to him, but only exists at all because of him.

When Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid", he's not just saying, 'It's okay, it's only me. I'm not a ghost.' Nor is he saying, 'There there, it'll be alright', like a mother calming a frightened child in the dark. Rather he's saying, 'I have authority over all of this and you can trust me.' And that's why the punchline of the story is the disciples worshipping Jesus and saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God." The point of the bit of the story where Peter tries to walk on the water isn't about Peter getting too big for his boots and trying to be like Jesus. It's rather about how difficult it is to trust Jesus in the middle of the storm. But when we do trust him enough to do what he commands, when we know we are living within his will and that we're open and responsive to the promptings of his spirit, then not only will our circumstances not overwhelm

us, but we shall become more like him in the process and share something of his authority over the things of this world.

So, what are you most afraid of?

Whatever answer you give, it will come under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we come to him today not in search of a wonder worker, not to learn from a great teacher, not even to keep on the good side of a ghost or unpredictable fate, but to place ourselves under the authority and protection of the Lord of Creation - the one whom we can trust without fear, the one who supports us with his faithfulness and love, who comes to us over the waters to take away our fears and anxieties and who looks at us with love and who bids us "Come."

## 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 doubt?' <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.'