



Beautifully and wonderfully human

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19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

13 August 2017

1 Kings 19:9-18

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

I like Peter. I like Peter because he's human. Sometimes he gets it, sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes he gets *Jesus*, sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes he gets what it means to *follow* Jesus, sometimes he doesn't. Peter is beautifully and wonderfully human.

Peter is one of Jesus' first disciples. He is the one who asks Jesus to explain his parables. Peter is the one who understands Jesus' true identity and says "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". Peter is the one Jesus calls "the rock on which I build my church", one minute before Jesus also calls him Satan, not on the side of God, but of men. Peter swears he will never deny Jesus, but does. Peter is full of faith one minute, and full of doubt the next. And in today's reading, Peter is the one whom Jesus calls to walk on the water, and the one who sinks. Over and over again Peter is the one who takes risks, makes great leaps of faith, then stumbles. Peter is the one who keeps getting up and brushing himself off to try again. What you see is what you get: an impetuous, outspoken disciple who both loves Jesus and lets him down, who deserves Jesus' judgement, but also receives his grace. Through all his ups and downs, his great moments and his awful ones, Peter is real. I do like Peter.

This gospel reading comes just after the feeding of the 5000. Jesus has sent his disciples on ahead of him in the boat, and goes up the mountain himself to pray. By nightfall he is still there and the disciples are still out on the boat, while a storm brews. The disciples are being rocked about in the waves and the wind, when, about three in the morning, the disciples spot a shadowy figure coming towards them across the water. Who is it? Is it a ghost? Or could it be Jesus? But why would Jesus be out there on the water at 3am? There is a clue about why, in Mark's version of this gospel story, because the word used for what Jesus was doing was that he "intended to pass by". This is the same word used in our Old Testament reading with Elijah in the cave – "the Lord is about to pass by". That word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to a "theophany" – a defining moment when God made a striking appearance in the earthly realm to an individual or group of people for the purpose of communicating a message.

So here is Jesus, "passing by" the disciples who are in the boat. It is Peter who gets it – who sees that this a moment when God in the form of Jesus is choosing to reveal himself in an extraordinary, totally unexpected way. All the disciples in the boat might be wondering if it's Jesus, but it is Peter who plucks up the courage to say something: "Lord if it is you, ask me to come to you on the water." In other words "Let me join you - show me that what you can do, I can do, if only you tell me. Take away my doubt, help me have faith".

Jesus does. Jesus says to Peter "Come". In that one single word, Jesus calls Peter to get out the boat, to risk everything in the midst of the storm. It just doesn't make any human sense for Peter to do that - the boat was the best and safest option. In contrast, the water was rough, the wind was strong, it was dangerous. Yet Peter obeys. He has been called and he responds.

At first, with his eyes on Jesus, Peter does just what Jesus did – he walks. I imagine him with his eyes fixed on Jesus ahead of him, cautiously stepping out of that boat while the others watch, incredulous, waiting and wondering what will happen. Peter walks towards Jesus. It's only when he realises the strength of the wind, gets scared, perhaps takes his eyes off

Jesus and looks at the swirling waves around him, that he begins to sink. Natural, human fear sets in and overwhelms him.

I wonder if many of us can relate to what happened to Peter. I know I can. Think about learning to ride a bike, when you gained enough speed so that suddenly you stopped wobbling looked ahead and sailed along – until you suddenly lost confidence, realised what you were doing, looked down to check, and wobbled over. Or think about a big gig or a speech you had to give, and at first the words flow smoothly, you’re maybe a bit nervous, but you’re fired up. And then, suddenly you focus on all the expectant faces in front of you and you lose your nerve, lose your train of thought, your heart beats faster and your hands begin to sweat. I’m sure there are many other examples you can think of.

When Peter begins to sink he feels that fear, and cries out to the only one he knows can save him - “Save me, Lord!” And Jesus does. He reaches down, pulls him up and guides him back to the boat. “Oh you of little faith – why did you doubt?”

There’s a book called *“If you Want to Walk on Water You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat”*.¹ It’s a book that draws on this Gospel story, to explore what it’s like to go outside your comfort zone, to have the courage to step out and meet Jesus in new ways.

Peter, so very human, obeyed and walked, feared and sank, believed and doubted. We do the same simply because we are human too. Our faith and our doubt both exist in us at the same time. They are not mutually exclusive. Our faith spurs us on, and our doubt holds us back. Just like Peter, we might feel a nudge to do something, feel called to do something brave, to “step out of the boat”. So in faith, we do. But also just like Peter, when we realise the enormity of what we’ve signed up for, we lose our nerve, we question ourselves, we question the call – and we doubt. We feel ourselves sinking out of our depth. We feel alone, inadequate. But Jesus is there, has been there all along. So when we call out to Jesus “Help me, save me”, Jesus reaches out and catches us, responding with grace, perhaps with

¹ John Ortberg, *If you Want to Walk on Water You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat*, Zondervan, 2001. This sermon also draws on Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

a sense of gentle rebuke – “Why did you doubt?” – but never with rejection. Jesus returns us to safety, celebrating with us that we had the guts, like Peter, to step out in the first place.

That’s all very good. But you might be wondering, why do we bother? Why even step out of the boat in the first place? Isn’t it just easier to be one of the disciples who stayed in the safety of the boat? We can still believe it’s Jesus, surely it doesn’t mean we have to get our feet wet?

Jesus “passed by” the boat for a reason. God “passed by” Elijah in the cave for a reason.

First: to invite them into closer relationship – to listen, to connect, to respond.

Second: to challenge them into action. For Elijah, it was to bravely go back through the wilderness and anoint the next king and prophet. For Peter it was to encourage him into an adventurous, risk-taking faith.

Third: to call them to learn and grow.

God “passes by” to shake up everything. God needs movers and shakers to grow the kingdom of God. We say we are followers of Jesus. Jesus is constantly looking for people who are willing to get out of the boat. There’s probably a storm out there, and sometimes we will struggle and sink. But Jesus will pick us up again. And Jesus knows that we will have learnt a bit more about faith and life in the midst of it all – that next time, we might walk a bit further, be a bit braver, and grow a bit more.

Food for thought for this week:

When was the last time you got out of the boat?

When was the last time you went out of your comfort zone for the sake of the kingdom of God?

If we want to walk on water, if we want to join in with Jesus in the messy, unpredictable reality of our world today, we’ve got to get out of the boat.

Amen.