**9th August 2020**



Call to worship

Jesus said: ‘Take courage, it is I. Don’t be afraid.’
Our God is a powerful God,
who does things way beyond our understanding.
But we have no need to fear,
for we know we are safe in God’s presence.
Let us come to our God now.
Let us bow down and worship.
Amen.



HYMN: Eternal Father strong to save

A gathering prayer

Lord, sometimes life following you can be difficult.
We find so many dilemmas and struggle so much,
wishing it could be easier.
We so want to trust you and see your plan for us.
Help us this morning to relax into your presence,
to clearly hear your word and be prepared to act on it.
In Jesus’ name.
Amen.



A prayer of approach

As we approach you today, Lord,
we probably feel pretty much like Peter –
full of bravado to begin with,
but then just not quite so certain of ourselves.
We come to you, Jesus,
trusting that even if we feel ourselves
beginning to sink under the pressures that we face,
we know you are still there holding us up.
Please reassure us that you won’t let go,
no matter how we feel.
Thank you, Lord.
Amen.



A prayer of confession

Lord God,
I’m sorry for the times I take my eyes off you,
and seek to do things in my own strength.
I’m sorry for the times I doubt that
you can keep me on the straight and narrow.
I’m sorry for the times I ask you for signs.
Lord, I pray that you will forgive
my doubts and hesitations,
show me your loving presence,
especially when I most need it,
and teach me to trust you at all times.
Amen.



A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

God of the earth and the waves,
we praise you that you more than meet all our needs.
You call us out from our security
to experience your adventures and blessings.
You don’t want us to be like a becalmed ship,
or stuck in the harbour.
You want us out in deep water –
and you’ll be with us.
We praise you, Lord.
Amen.

Lord’s Prayer



**Matthew 14.22-33**

This afternoon we have hired a fishing boat and we are going out into the Bristol Channel. Then we’ll offer a course in water walking. Bring your swimming costume just in case you fail the faith test.

Walking on water: people still use that expression to describe someone who is superhuman and a wonder worker.

A Catholic priest, a Baptist preacher and a rabbi fish in a lake. The preacher has to use the bathroom, so he walks across the water, does his business and walks back. Then the rabbi has to go, so he walks across the water, does his business and walks back.

The Catholic has to go, but when he gets out he falls into the water. He swims back, gets back into the boat, and says, "God, let me walk across the water." He tries again and falls into the water, swims back, tries again and falls again.

The Baptist leans over to the rabbi and asks, "Do you think we should tell him where the stepping stones are?" The Rabbi replies ‘What stepping stones?’

Does anyone actually believe they can actually literally walk on water? It stretches credulity. A rational person surely could not believe in such things.

Some have seen this story as a resurrection narrative that is out of place, perhaps one that exists in the same narrative world as that in John 21. Just as you struggle to believe someone can walk on water, you may struggle to believe that someone was raised from the dead. This seems to be a story that is more centred on Peter and his faith than on Jesus and his identity. It is a story that encourages ordinary Jesus-followers as it confirms that ‘the twelve’, despite their proximity to Jesus for three years, still struggled with their faith. And perhaps Jesus (v.31) is not so much chiding Peter as recognising the frail material he has to work with. Here is someone who, along with the others, has seen Jesus conjure a meal for 5,000 out of a packed lunch and yet seems to find faith a struggle.

Remember that this incident happens just after Jesus hears the awful news of John the Baptist’s murder (Matthew 14.1-12). We are told that Jesus withdrew by boat to a private and solitary place (Matthew 14.13) – a reaction we may be familiar with when something terrible happens. We just need time alone to get our heads around it. Or perhaps we reach out to others for comfort and reassurance, a shoulder to cry on, someone else to help us make sense of it all. Maybe Jesus was seeking time alone with his Father, to check in with him. Which of these reactions – reaching out, and turning in – do you normally have when life is stormy? Are both important to help us weather the storm?

As the disciples are trying to sail their boat through rough waters, Jesus is again up the mountain, trying to have some quiet time alone – something many of us will have struggled to find in these last few months. How do you make space for reflection and prayer at the moment? Can you protect some quiet ‘me time’ each day?

I really feel for the disciples, who are experiencing the worst kind of sea, with the wind against them and the short, choppy waves this often produces. Sailing like this is noisy and uncomfortable, as the boat bashes against the waves; and it can be scary if the waves are steep or the boat is small. It can make it very hard to reach your destination; You draw on your trust in your strong boat and the encouragement of other sailors to have faith that all will be well – as well as your faith in God. What helps you to hold on to hope when it seems that the wind is too much against you?

Out in the vast deep blue, miles from land, we are faced with the reality that life is beyond our control.[[1]](#endnote-1) How do we find the courage to continue after a [world pandemic like Covid](https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-53661262), or a man-made disaster like [the terrible explosion in Beirut](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/08/alive-survivors-recount-beirut-explosion-200804175426591.html) this week? Sometimes all we can do is take a leap of faith. But then maybe, like Peter, we panic when we find ourselves in at the deep end! As sailors, we can call on [the RNLI](https://rnli.org/) to come to our aid; as Christians we can call on God, and each other. Who do you turn to when you need rescuing? How can you encourage each other to hold on to hope and keep faith, when you find yourselves in at the deep end?

In the story of Jesus walking on water, when the disciples see him walking towards them they are filled with fear. Jesus says take courage. It is I. don’t be afraid. Peter says ‘lord if it is you; tell me to come to you on the water’.

Jesus beckons him with the word ‘come’.

Then Peter got down out of the boat and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink cried out ‘Lord save me! Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith’ Jesus said. ‘Why did you doubt?’

You never know the tone in which the speech in the bible text is spoken. I’d like to think that Jesus says these words in a jokey, sarcastic way – ‘you can’t walk on water – what little faith you have – why did you doubt? It’s very simple, anyone can do it! Duhh!

In that answer Jesus puts faith and doubt together and both are of course intimately linked and that’s what I think this story is all about and what I want to explore a little more.

I prepared myself for theological college in the belief that if those sceptical liberal atheistic tutors were going to try and demolish my faith, best they do it before I burned my bridges and went into ministry. At times, theological training felt like an unremitting assault on everything I had held dear. You were required to question everything, to believe nothing, to hone your sceptical critical abilities and doubt. It was like being dipped in a pot of paint stripper. I came out of it with a clearer idea of what I could hold onto. I said I entered college with certainties and I left with faith.

I was more of a trusting type before college but after college I walked on the tightrope of faith and doubt. You can balance there, so long as you don’t look down. Peter looked down at a crucial moment.

Doubt can be a difficulty for clergy and for believers in different ways. Super confident believers among the clergy can be intimidating to searchers and doubters. However it is almost certainly the case that some of the most confident over-believers are running from their own unacknowledged doubts. This is a slippery subject of course, but there does seem to be an inverse relationship between vehement pronunciation and inner certainty. The more you shout and proclaim faith the more actually you are trying to cover up for doubts. Bertrand Russell, the atheist remarked that zeal was a bad mark for a cause. No one was zealous about the two times table. People are zealous about things they are not quite or cannot be quite sure about. Their anxiety leads them to compensatory exaggeration.[[2]](#endnote-2)

We can recognise the phenomenon in other areas. We know for instance that some of the most passionate crusaders against vice are themselves deeply troubled about their own sexuality. The pain of this unadmitted inner struggle is often transposed into ostentatious public denunciation of the very part of the person’s inner nature he or she most fears. All of which demonstrates to us the need to know our doubts, especially the unadmitted ones; or at least to achieve empathy with the doubts of others, even if we do not share them.

Another danger that faces clergy, in particular, comes not from a reluctance to address doubt, but from a public fixation with it. Clergy can become obsessed with what they perceive to be the naïve beliefs of their parishioners which they seek to disturb at any cost. This usually takes the form of repeated assaults upon the uncritical acceptance of historic truth of the gospels, usually focused on the virgin birth and the resurrection – but for today’s purposes: walking on water. It is of course possible to believe in these things the wrong way, or with unnecessary passion; but it is equally possible to become obsessed with their historical unreliability and to expect a precision in understanding and language about them that is unattainable. Some go from doubt about the reality of God to complete certainty about the unreality of God! Doubt can hijack and torment many an ordained minister. Particularly if you spend most of your week dealing with people’s problems and miseries and you turn up to an empty church for Sunday morning.

You have to laugh or else you would cry. Humour does help in that it gives you a sense of proportion. Humour is important element in faith….. Not only does it give a sense of proportion it gives an awareness of the at times disjointedness of many human claims and occasions. Humour can rescue us from our own obsessions, whether of over belief or unbelief, just as it can rescue us from a self-important absorption in our own sinfulness. We need faith infused with humour that recognises oddness, the bizarre, and the absurd elements of our faith and therefore notes the courage of humanity to seek to understand and explain the mysteries of the universe.

That’s why I like to read Jesus response to Peter as a bit tongue in cheek: ‘you of little faith, why did you doubt you could walk on water – it’s easy!

You of little faith: why did you doubt?

What does all this mean? Do we possess specific faculties that put us in touch with God, stronger and more developed in some than in others, exaggerated in some, non-existent in others? Some people are so much into thinking that they are bad at relating to others emotionally. Some are so emotionally undisciplined their lives are like Italian Operas. Is it possible that there is an intuitive spiritual faculty that has been crowded out by the dominant intellectual culture of our day, which has overthrown the softer faculties of wonder and receptivity?

Some claim that much of this is to do with the lack of silence in our lives and by lack of silence they mean not just the prevalence of noise, though noise is clearly a major source of spiritual pollution and disturbance today. If there is mystery that seeks to touch us, we cannot hear its approach in our culture, unlike the Bushmen in the Kalahari or the aboriginals in Australia under the vast silence of the night sky. Has the faculty for wonder been dried up by the critical dynamic of our technological society, with its endless noise, even if the noise is heard only in our heads? It is certainly difficult to find real silence today, especially with social media, smart phones, tablets etc. Most of the great religions have come from the desert, not from the city.

A while ago on TV was the reality programme the Monastery in which a number of men took the opportunity to spend a number of weeks in Worth Abbey with Benedictine monks One of them was Tony Burke, an atheist who worked in the porn industry. He was looking for a sign, some evidence of God.

During a mentoring session with one of the monks at the monastery Tony Burke changed. As an audience of millions watched, many of whom warmed to his honesty, his doubts visibly dissolved. Afterwards he spoke into his video diary and said:

*‘I didn’t want this to happen… when I woke up this morning, I didn’t believe in this, but, as I speak to you now, I do.*’

Tony encountered God by allowing enough time, space, and silence to explore the questions about faith – and to listen for a response.

How many of us with our hectic schedules are able to give ourselves the time, space and silence to let our doubts breathe? For many the big questions of life slowly eat away at us, unresolved, while we spend time day in day out dealing with smaller but more pressing issues that grab our attention.

The disciples are in a boat in the middle of a lake, at night. They are still and silent with no other distractions. They are overcome with awe and fear when they see Jesus walking towards them. This then produces faith in Peter to set out of the boat.

When he thinks about what he is doing, he starts to sink.

Peter is a great icon of faith in that he believes yet also doubts. He trusts and he denies.

Somehow, we must retain the dialectic, the tension between faith and doubt, between credulity and criticality. The totally credulous or too trusting person becomes a caricature of spiritual obesity, uncritically swallowing something from every cult and craze, while absolute criticality can lead to spiritual anorexia, an inability to receive anything from the mystery that pervades us and so spiritually starves itself to death.

The paradox of justification by faith is that it is God’s faith in us that ultimately matters and not our faith in God. There is faith beyond faith, which is a deeper trust in our trustfulness and is abandonment to the ultimate graciousness of the universe. This is the trust that says ‘yes’ even in the night. That when hung on a cross on Good Friday can cry out ‘my God why have you forsaken me in one breath but then still find the faith to say ‘Father into your hands I commit my spirit’.

For some the level of doubt is unbearable. They surely have our compassion. For some, they can wait with gentleness. If the night is dark, wait for the daybreak. It usually comes. On the third day…

Faith is never static, but active and dynamic. It fluctuates. This is as natural as the ebb and flow of the tide. But what can be more beautiful, more powerful and more lasting than the sea? If the sea were still, it would stagnate. So it is that faith undisturbed by any waves of doubt becomes spiritually stagnant.

Cardinal Basil Hume described faith this way:

*You can go so far paddling in the sea, and there comes a point where it has to carry you. So it is that reason can only go so far, and then comes the point where faith has to carry you.*

Which is why this story of walking on water is so beautiful because it holds that tension in Peter of faith and doubt and that in the end God holds on to us, just as Jesus sticks out a hand to Peter and saves him. And at the same time laughing: ‘you of little faith!’

Lord hang on to us. Help us to risk and doubt, to trust and have the courage to try new things. Help us to laugh at our seriousness and our fears. We believe, help our unbelief.

Amen.



Prayers of intercession

Lord God, we come before you to pray for all those people
for whom taking risks is a way of life.
Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray for our emergency services – paramedics, the police,
the fire service – all who daily face difficult situations
as they seek to help to protect us and make our world a safer
and more peaceful place.
Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray for people who work in troubled areas
– the armed forces in war zones,
those who bring humanitarian aid
into areas of natural disaster, and many more.
Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray for the people of Lebanon. Hold those hwo have lost loved ones in your hand. Wee pray your provision for those who are without homes and food and afce an uncertina future. We pray for tis leaders that they may respond with integrity and service. Help us be compassionate to all in need, whether they are the victims of explosions, trafficking, or seeking asylum.

We pray for people who take risks in your name, Lord Jesus
– those who take your word where it is most needed
– and for people who grapple with faith and doubt.
Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.
Amen.

*Picture a lifeboat going out to a rescue in stormy seas.*

Lord, sometimes people who don’t know you
think we have the easy option. If only…
When we’re in the deep water of doubt, flailing about,
nearly going under, can’t see land on the horizon,
we thank you, Lord, that you are our lifeboat,
and will always rescue us and bring us back to you.
Amen

**HYMN: Will your anchor hold**

**Notices**

The elders met this week and decided that they feel it is safe enough to meet again for worship in this building. We are planning a first service back the first Sunday in September, Sept 6th. To do that, we will need people willing to make the service happen – people to steward. If you are willing to help then please be in touch.

There is no obligation for anyone to physically come back to worship. We will endeavour to make the services avaible over the internet as they are at the moment – so you can still stay at home and watch if you would prefer.

It won’t be the same experience of worship we had before lockdown – we are required by the government to observe certain restrictions. But it does give those who want it the opportunity to meet together at last.

We will be issuing more information in the coming weeks as we make preparations for the 6th of September.

A sending out prayer

Peter only knew life as a fisherman.
But he got out of the boat and followed you, Lord.
Help us to hear your voice,
get out of our boats and follow you.
In the week ahead,
may the world and its problems decrease
as you increase in our lives.
Keep us focused on your way,
looking ahead and trusting you.
Amen.

1. Jane Chevous, <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/108-july-august-a/proper-14/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Holloway, Anger, Sex, Doubt and Death, SPCK 1992 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)