



courage and faith



<Matthew 14:22-33>

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but by this time the

boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

28 Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." 29 He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

This is the second in the series *Living Outside the Box* inspired by some of the stories Matthew shares with us about some of the miraculous events in Jesus' life. These must have had an immeasurable impact on the disciples as they enjoyed Jesus' company travelling around Galilee at this point in His ministry.

It is far too easy to get sucked into conversation and speculation about what really happened, or whether the stories can be explained away. In so doing, we miss the combination of wonder, mystery and deep spiritual insight that is to be found in these stories. As I read this passage, what strikes me most is that the act of Jesus and Peter walking on the water is by no means the most important element of the story, unless we as readers make it so.

It is always worth standing back from individual passages to see the bigger picture. Nowhere is this more so than in the synoptic gospels where each of the writers: Matthew, Mark and Luke, each have their own story to tell, deeply interwoven in the way they, as editors, position individual encounters against each other. Our gospel reading for today is written for us by Matthew, but there is a direct equivalent of a story shared by John in that wonderfully inspiring chapter 6.

Many of you will know from my preaching that it is in John's gospel that I find the roots of my faith. John shares with us the profound spiritual truths which he discovered through his reflection on Jesus' life. John does not talk about miracles – for him there is no concept of a journal, diary or almanac telling the true stories of Jesus' life journey – instead there are only signs and wonders which carry a depth of meaning about God's desire for us and His influence on our lives.

Beginning with what Matthew shares with us, as we stand back, we discover some of the truths to which it can open our eyes. In our service last week, Joan opened our eyes to the way Matthew sets this story in context. Perhaps more important than chronological positioning is the way Matthew sets a context of Jesus' own personal feelings and mood. It is as we look at Jesus' mood that perhaps we are best prepared for Living Outside the Box in a time of pandemic – refusing to allow what is happening around us to dominate our own attitude. As Jesus says to Peter, it takes both courage and faith to find new ways to live outside the Box, and to live in relationship with God, based on our experience and our reflected memories. I mean live, really live and flourish and be inspired. I'm going to draw on both versions before us, the story told by Matthew, and that told by John.

In the lead up to today's reading as Joan reminded us last week, Jesus had just heard that John the Baptist, his cousin, has been beheaded in jail. As Jesus tries to find peace and quiet to pray, and mourn his passing, he is chased by a large crowd who have tracked him down in the middle of nowhere in their eagerness to hear the words of inspiration and freedom on which his reputation was being built. Perhaps they too needed some solace having heard of John's death. Jesus had fed them spiritually, and then as you explored last week with Joan, he had miraculously supplemented the spiritual food with which he had filled them, by providing the bread and fish to meet their physical hunger.

Then we pick up today's passage when, according to Matthew, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat to cross the lake to their next destination, so that he, Jesus could escape on his own as he so often did – to climb the mountain and pray – and find that quiet grief that the crowd had interrupted. For him, personal physical needs were completely overshadowed by his spiritual need to be fed in that precious time of prayer. He had confronted both the spiritual needs of the crowd and their physical need, and he was drained. His reflection must have been full of fond memories and dreams he had shared with John. His time of prayer was the nourishment he really needed, so that he could carry on living out of the box personally, and continue his ministry of encouraging others to do so too.

We need to turn to John's account to read the alternative perspective that instead of Jesus telling his disciples to take the boat across the lake, they waited for him on the shore, whilst he sought the privacy of prayer. He saw the intention of the crowd, whom he had now fed both spiritually and with the miraculous quantity of bread. They intended to make him their king to protect them and maybe even champion them so that they could exact revenge for the senseless killing of John. How often today do we see causes seeking justice and fairness boxing their leaders into actions they neither want, nor can control.

The crowd wanted to elevate him to celebrity status and make him their figurehead in their desire for justice and release from oppression characterised by the murder of John. Jesus knew this would be so far removed from his humble, faithful communion with the Father. So, he went alone to pray, and John reminds us that his disciples were left waiting. When it was very late and he still hadn't returned, they chose to take the only boat from the shore to cross the lake: presumably to where they had planned to spend the night.

Can you see the torment in Jesus' mind as he retreats for prayer? Mourning his cousin, reminded that maybe the last time he had seen John before his imprisonment, was when John had baptised him, and God had affirmed his calling. Now John was dead and the memories came flooding back. Is it mere coincidence that Jesus has just been confronted by a large, hungry crowd, and in their need it is as if he has turned stone to bread with the abundance of food they ended up with? Living out the very temptation he had faced in the wilderness. Had he succumbed to the temptation by feeding them this time?

Surely, he is wrestling in his prayer! Reminded afresh about his calling, and whether he should live that out. Boxed in with human priorities, or liberated by God’s priorities. As he reflected, he recalled his response “man shall not live by bread alone, but by the words from God”. He is comforted by the reminder that his first response was indeed to feed them with words of God, and only then did he provide the bread to feed them, using his power to supplement their spiritual food with physical food.

But as his thoughts linger on those enduring temptations, he recalls that even after he has fed them, the scene continues to play out. In the very next instant he is confronted with the crowd tempting him to take on the power and false cloak of celebrity status – a promise echoing that temptation of receiving wealth and fame, in return for bowing down to false gods. As he retreats to the mountain to feed his own spirit, can you see his anguished prayer? Yet again he draws on scripture – “Worship the Lord your God alone”, as he firmly places temptation back into its box.

After his long and gruelling time of prayer, he comes down to the shoreline. No more boats, and his friends battling the stormy lake. In the privacy and quiet of the evening, we are presented with another miracle as he walks across the water to them. This is no flashy act – no showing off – no attempt at boosting his ego – just the practical needs-driven desire to reach his friends who are in difficulty on the notoriously storm riven lake.

Do you hear the challenge in Peter’s voice? “Lord, IF its you, tell me to come”. Reawakening Jesus’ reflection on those words of temptation from the wilderness. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down”. “Do not put your Lord to the test”! When Jesus reaches out and saves Peter from the waves – there is sadness and poignancy in that response. You of little faith, why did you doubt?

Temptations	Scripture response	Miracles and signs
Turn these stones to bread You can have rule over all this If you are the Son of God... Jesus called his disciples	Not live by bread alone, but by God's word Worship God alone Do not put God to the test	Feed the 5000 hungry people Crowd wanted to make him King If it's you, tell me to come to you You are the Messiah. Why would we leave?

It is telling that not long after this story in their respective gospels both John and Matthew relate their different versions of the moment Peter redresses his moment of doubt. Later in chapter 6, when John reports that the crowds are showing their fickleness and leaving because they can’t cope with what Jesus is saying to them. He turns to the disciples “Will you leave also?” to which Peter responds with words of total and utter commitment – words I

turn to time and again in my own faith – “Lord why on earth would we leave? Only in your presence have we truly experienced life in all its richness and felt the blessing of God’s Glory. We have nowhere else to turn to experience such wonder and fulfilment”. In contrast, Matthew’s moment of affirmation is at Caesarea Phillipi in chapter 16 when Jesus asks them “Who do you say I am?” To which Peter responds “You are the Messiah, the chosen one”.

Peter shows that although he knows that Jesus is the Messiah, he has no clue as to the true nature of the Messiah. You will recall that Jesus appears to condemn him, when he looks at Peter and says “Get thee behind me Satan”. But I take you back to when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. This time we have to rely on Luke, who tells us that after Jesus has rebuffed the three temptations, the devil leaves Jesus for a more opportune moment.

As I have hinted today, throughout the gospel accounts, we see time and again moments when Jesus is again tested in his resolve, and must have constantly come back to those

reflections, and encounters with temptation. It is too easy to see the temptations as a fleeting moment, but armed with Luke's telling comment, we can see temptation never being far away, and Jesus total commitment through prayer, to standing firm in his resolve, and in the direction of his ministry. I don't think Jesus was rebuffing Peter at all in that moment. I suggest that maybe he was once again reflecting back to those constant temptations trying to deflect him from his true course. His command to satan to get behind him, is more readily explained if we see him suppressing those inner thoughts of an easier alternative: less painful and full of the fame and fortune so desired by others.

As we explore behind these miracle stories and signs, we are not to be distracted by the detailed actions or events, but to see what they teach of Jesus and the constancy of his faith repeatedly challenged by memories and events and triggers, remorselessly offering an alternative way forward which carries more fame and fortune, less pain, but requires a denial of God. The disciples saw how Jesus constantly challenged and refreshed his spiritual purpose, and Jesus in turn constantly gave them teaching and example to help them live outside the confined box of earthly demands.

As we are being tossed around by the storm of Covid 19, and Jesus walks through the storm telling us to have courage, and not to be afraid. Do we hold half back and make our offer conditional – "If it is you Lord tell me to come to you" – only to falter for too little faith? Or are we prepared to live outside the box with both courage and faith – "Where else can we go to be as enriched as we are in your presence Lord? Why would we ever want to leave the life accompanied by the chosen one of God and full of His glory and grace?"