**Jesus walks on a rough sea** 25/2/24

Read: Matthew 14:22-36, Mark 6:45-56

Text: Mark 6:45-52

Psalms: 144:3-10, 18:6-17, 116:1-9, 134

The Bible is such an exciting book to read! Sure, there are some things that are hard to understand but what could be more exciting than this story of Jesus walking on the sea. Millions of dollars are spent on making movies that show men walking up walls or flying through space. They have to spend the money on special effects, on make- believe because it is not real. But here is true story, an eye witness record of something real, though supernatural. Yet many try to explain away the reality of what we have just read.

I recall a show in which a man was supposedly walking on water, a couple of inches of water, covering a rock platform. If the producers of that show had bothered to read the Bible they would have seen that the wind was whipping up huge waves on the lake when Jesus walked on the water. How blessed we are to be reading this story with believing rather than sceptical, unbelieving hearts. Some people spend so much time and effort trying to refute the truths of the Bible when they could believe and enjoy and be blessed in reading the word of God. There is a danger for us however, that we become over-familiar with this story, and fail to grasp the enormity of what Jesus did. Let us, for a moment, imagine ourselves in the boat with the disciples- and go back just hours earlier with Jesus multiplying the five loaves and two fish.

The outcome of the feeding miracle was not exactly as Jesus hoped. The people were filled with food, and with amazement, but they were focussing in earthly rather than heavenly realities. The Jews were looking for a kingly Messiah, not a suffering servant Messiah (Isa 53). The more they saw Jesus perform miracles the more they hoped he was their king, a king like David. In John’s gospel we read that after being miraculously fed on the hillside near Bethsaida, these men said, ‘This is truly the Prophet who is said to come into the world’. Hearing this, ‘Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take him by force to make him their king’ (John 6:14, 15).

What happened after this is another exciting story, another ‘nature miracle’ revealing the supernatural power of Jesus, and showing him to be the Son of God. Mark does not include details about Peter stepping out of the boat and walking towards Jesus (Mat 14:28-31) but, apart from this, their accounts are very similar. Jesus rebuked Peter for doubting and lacking faith, while Mark describes all as having their heart hardened (6:52). Yet, according to Mathew, they all worshipped Jesus as the Son of God (Mat 14:33) - more on this later. We will look at these verses under the subheadings: ‘In prayer’, ‘It is a ghost’, ‘It is I', ‘Inside their hearts’.

**1. in prayer**

When the twelve baskets of left-overs were collected Jesus dismissed the crowd. It was now quite late and they needed to return home before it became completely dark. But, as noted by John, they did not want to leave the Miracle-worker. They wanted to take him and make him their king. Were the disciples open to this idea? They were still thinking Jesus would restore the kingdom to Israel after he rose from the dead (Acts 1:6). So Jesus, understandably, was keen to get them out of this place. Jesus quickly made his disciples get into the boat and head back across the lake, or more immediately to Bethsaida (6:45). He sent the crowd away to their homes, while he himself went up on the mountain to pray.

Jesus had come to this place with his disciples for rest, rest for them but Jesus also need to rest. Above all, he needed time with his Father in prayer. He would have been tired after the busy day of teaching and feeding five thousand men. Moreover, their attempt to take him by force and make him king (John 6:15) made prayer even more urgent. Satan had tried to sabotage his mission just after the wonder of his baptism. One of Satan’s temptations was the offer of the kingdoms of this world. It is not certain that Jesus was experiencing such temptation again, but he was aware of Satan’s attempt to turn him away from the path of obedience to God (Mat 16:23). It is not certain because we are not told what Jesus prayed that night; although we can assume he prayed for his disciples.

Jesus had put the disciples in the boat and dismissed the crowd, before going alone into the mountains to pray. If Jesus needed time alone with his heavenly Father, so do you! It is not always easy to find a quiet place in a busy household, but you must do so if you want to grow in the Lord. Maybe you have to get up early, before the family, or go out to the shed. If you are to resist temptation you must read your Bible and pray. If you want to avoid stress and confusion in your life you must read and pray. While Jesus was praying his disciples were struggling with headwinds; there is no mention of them praying!

**2. It is a ghost**

Jesus saw his disciples struggling to row the boat against a strong headwind. Just how and when he saw them we are not told. One moment he was ‘alone on the land’, and the next he was ‘walking on the sea’. It was very early the next morning, between 3am and 6am when Jesus came to his disciples walking on the sea. Mark makes the interesting comment that he ‘would have passed them by’ (6:48); but they saw him and cried out, they cried out in fear (Mat 14:26). Just what they cried out is not clear but their fear was palpable. It was not a cry of faith but Jesus heard it as a cry for help and he looked upon them with mercy.

Jesus does not impose himself on anyone, but he is near and ready to hear your cry for help or for mercy. Remember blind Bartimeous crying out, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ -he would not stop until Jesus called him (10:47). At Emmaus Jesus similarly made as if he would go on before the disciples restrained him (Luke 24:38). Jesus loves to be ‘bothered’ by your prayers and cries for mercy! But if you ignore him he will ignore you, until you come before him on judgment day!

When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea and about to pass them by, they thought he was a ghost. This is what they cried out, according to Matthew (Mat 14:26). How amazing; they believed in ghosts but not in the power of Jesus to walk on the water! But before we judge these men let us look to ourselves. Are there any irrational beliefs lingering in your heart? A report I received from the church in South Africa read, ‘Syncretism is within most of the denominations… student ministers at Dumisani had no clue it’s against God to keep worshipping ancestors while serving him’. African churches are not alone in this sinister sin of syncretism. You will find church members consulting horoscopes or ancient beliefs and rituals, or believing they were ‘fated’ to marry a childhood sweetheart even after marrying another person! Superstition is rife, even in the church! It was not a ghost the disciple’s saw- it was Jesus. Supernatural- yes, but superstitious- no; I hope you know the difference! Superstitions bring fear, but Jesus brings faith.

**3. It is I**

In the fourth watch of the night, between 3 and 6am by Roman reckoning, Jesus appeared to the disciples walking on the sea. They were in ‘the middle of sea’, 5-6km from the place where they started (6:47, Mat 14:24, John 6:19). They were wide awake, struggling to make headway against the wind and the waves, when they suddenly saw a man walking on the rough sea near their boat. Some of these men had spent many nights on this lake fishing but had never seen what they now saw. Shaking with terror they cried out, ‘It’s a ghost!’ (Mat 14:26). We don’t believe in ghosts, and neither did they, but what else could it be? Jesus must have heard them above the noise of the wind and the waves because he answered them immediately.

Hearing the familiar voice of Jesus, they realized that this was not a ghost but was Jesus- not that they fears immediately disappeared! Supernatural things are scary until you know the underlying power and person. My daughter leapt out her chair with fright when I suddenly appeared in the door way of her home office the other day. I knocked, but she thought it was just the postman. The front door was open so I went in. I did not walk through a locked door- but Jesus can! ‘It’s just your father’, I said. Listen to what Jesus said to his disciples as he walked on the water towards them in the middle of the night. ‘Be of good cheer!’ or, as others translate, ‘Take heart’ or ‘Take courage’ (6:50). These words served to calm their fears. One writer tells us to ‘look up and calm down’.

The ‘ghost’ identified himself- ‘It is I’ or literally, ‘I am’. Jesus spoke the same words on another occasion, a time when the Jews were questioning his claim to set them free from sin (John 8:58). The Jews tried to stone him for blasphemy because these are the very words God told Moses to use as his name- *Yahweh* in Hebrew (Exod 3:14). As Jews, this association of ‘I am’ with Yahweh would not have escaped the disciples in the boat. They were terribly afraid, but Jesus told them not to be, as he came towards them.

Mark, for some reason, does not include the bit about Peter getting out of the boat to walk on the water towards Jesus; to read this you have to turn to Matthews’s gospel. Peter was impetuous but was also the leader of the group and reflects their thoughts. In this story Peter took his eyes of Jesus and began to sink (Mat 14:30). Jesus reached out to grab him, saying, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt’. What sort of faith do you have if Peter’s faith was ‘little’?

**4. Inside their hearts**

Mark does not tell us about Peter, but he does report that after telling his fear-filled disciples that it was him, Jesus got into the boat and the wind stopped (6:51). Their desperate struggle against the wind was over. All was calm when Jesus got into the boat with them. They struggled to believe what they saw, and what they heard, but their struggle to stay alive was over. They were greatly amazed and marvelled, but this was reality (6:51). They were overwhelmed by the mighty power and love of Jesus. Jesus did not pass them by (6:48).

How gracious of Jesus. Do you know the grace of Jesus in reaching out to save you? When the Philippian jailer asked the apostle Paul, ‘What must I do to be saved’, what did Paul say? ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved’ (Acts 16:31). His problems were so huge he was about to take his own life. But he looked up and saw Paul reflecting the love of Christ. He cried out and he was saved, saved by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mark writes that they marvelled (6:51) but Matthew writes that they worshipped Jesus. They realised they were in the presence of God. They saw Jesus as more than a man. They saw Jesus as more than a prophet. They saw Jesus as the Son of God, God’s own Son. Seeing what they did and hearing what they heard, they concluded that Jesus is God’s own Son, and as such is worthy of worship. Oh that all who call themselves Christian would make the same conclusion, and all who worship other gods would also bow down and worship Jesus, the Son of God.

But Mark concludes that the disciples had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened (6:52). Hearing the words ‘hearts were hardened’ alarms us. But listen to what Alan Cole writes: ‘Smallness of faith and hardness of heart are two constant sins of God’s people. Hardness of heart is the lack of spiritual perceptivity, the lack of readiness to learn for which we are ultimately blameworthy ourselves, and in the extreme case of the Pharisees, could lead at last to sin against the Holy Spirit. Smallness of faith is a failure to consider God’s working in the past and apply that knowledge of His nature to our present problems’. Irrational fears, and even unbelief, lie just below the surface in our hearts, our converted hearts (Heb 3:12,13). With the Lord’s help, let us push them deeper and deeper, never to surface in our life.