

## Sermon for St Mary the Virgin Baldock

Sunday August 9<sup>th</sup> 2020

Trinity 9 (Proper 14)

a) Romans 10.5-15

b) Matthew 14.22-33

Schooldays were a very long time ago for me. Most of it now is just a general blur of grafittied desks and leaky fountain pens, of school blazers not grown into yet suddenly grown out of, battered textbooks thumbed by many inky fingers before mine, the stinky bad egg atmosphere of chemistry labs adhering to the throat, of getting into trouble for gazing out the window at Rugby matches on the school playing field and therefore 'not paying attention', of half-hearted singing at school assemblies, of homework rushed or plain ignored, of excruciating helpless anxiety both before and after exams, of teachers who would kick you up the backside as soon as look at you, yet of others who really did want to help us to do well and get on in life.

Most of what remains in the memory is out of focus now, a kind of impressionist painting of sense, feeling and colour though with the added-in noise of a thousand schoolboys weighed down with satchels rushing through corridors. I remember how it all looked and sounded, but not much else.

But it's strange how odd inconsequential little moments from school do stick in the mind with absolute clarity and stay there all your life whilst many more important occasions turn into memory porridge, blended and indiscernible among all the rest. Why is it I wonder that I can recall one rather turgid RE lesson in which today's gospel reading came under discussion, so that to this day I can never read it without remembering what was said?

Our regular teacher was away, long term sickness. His stand-in had come out of retirement to take our classes and looked to us like the Ancient of Days, though there's a good chance that he might have been slightly younger than I am now. And so, somehow we came to this story from the Gospel of Matthew, high winds and convulsive waves, the terrified disciples still more terrified to see the figure of Jesus walking towards them on the lake, heedless of the tumult both within and without the frail wooden boat.

Our teacher, perhaps conscious of the gulf in years between him and we 12-year olds, aware too of the scepticism of the teenage years into which we were about to grow, times when you start to believe that everything an adult tells you is bound to be wrong, worked hard on finding ways to explain this crazy story to us in rational terms we might be able to accept. He had, I recall, three or four ideas about

how this walking on water feat might have been done, but the one I remember with piecing clarity and can't stop myself picturing every time I hear the story read, is this: that there might have been, known to Jesus but to no-one else, an underwater causeway on which he could walk out to meet the boat which was in such peril on the sea. So the explanation was that when Jesus appeared to be walking on water he was in fact strolling along some kind of sandbar stretching as far out into the sea as Matthew says the boat was, 'far from the land'.

Actually I have always imagined this causeway as a solid structure of brick like some kind of seaside breakwater though I guess our teacher did not think of it in such concrete terms. But what nevertheless, reasoned my 12-year old mind, would a thing like that do to the bottom of a boat sailing across it unawares? At best you'd

run aground, at worst be smashed to smithereens. Some of the disciples had made their living on the Sea of Galilee, and any fisherman worth his salt would have made it his business to know about underwater obstructions so as to sail round them – amazed they therefore would *not* have been, to see someone walking on it, had it been there. And if an solution like that has to be found, something to explain it all away, how is it then that the mortal Jesus can walk along a narrow causeway without losing his balance in the midst of a howling gale and heaving waves? To me this plan just did not seem to work at all.

But the thing was that our good and mild mannered substitute teacher actually did make me think, and perhaps that was his true intention. If so then he succeeded because as you can see I've been thinking about it my entire life. Every time I hear of Jesus walking on

water I think 'underwater causeway'. And then I think, no.... surely not, and then... what *do* I think?

So what then do we think? Well to me as always, the story is the story and as they say these days 'it is what it is', no use mucking about with it. All our lives turn into stories as we live them and they become the tale we tell. But when we give up our obsession with facts and their limits, give up our 'what really happened' fixation, give up trying to make a story fit the laws of physics (a school exam I failed by the way) we have to ask, *what truth does this story bear?*

*What truth did it bring to lives of those disciples and what truth can it bring to our lives now?*

And when we look at it that way this story carries a really strong message for us and for the times we've unexpectedly plunged into.

For what do we see Jesus really doing? What are the most important things? Two things really – first he calms the fears of his disciples, and that is not just about that storm, that night, that early morning, but about all that lies ahead both for him and for them. Secondly he encourages them to face with courage what might seem to them to be impossible tasks. Given the ordinary days and ways of their earlier lives, how could they ever dare to conceive what they would confront and achieve later on, diving into the unknown and taking the message of Jesus out into the world, a mission which cost all of them not less than their lives?

In this time of fear which seems to invite us all to shrink into ourselves, to go into hibernation and perhaps never come out, there turns out to be so much in our Bible, not just this story, which can help us overcome our fears and to know that whatever comes to

pass we are held, loved and protected; that in the end we will be safe because of the simple undefeatable power of the love of God. It's amazing how in these last few months so much in our Bible has come to life and acquired new and deeper meaning. In particular the Psalms are a great source of hope and inspiration. 'If I take the wings of the morning' declares Psalm 139 'and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, your right hand hold me fast'. Well Peter certainly needed to have his hand held on life's stormy waters and Jesus reached out to catch that flailing arm. He will do the same for us, but only so that we like Peter, may learn to do ourselves what might seem impossible right now. We can always do much more than we have confidence to believe; walking on water was it seems, for Peter as well as Jesus, and therefore it is also for us. 'He fulfils the desire of all those who fear him' says Psalm 145; 'he hears their cry and saves them.' All of a sudden we

are reading words like these in a new way and despite all the difficulties hedging us round and hemming us in, faith is coming alive once more and renewing in us the promise of life more abundant. And to be able to say that in the midst of troubled times is to give God thanks for our lives, all that has been and all that is to come. We may sometimes be afraid, but look, no need to hunt for underwater causeways, we are learning to walk on water and Christ is at our side.

Amen