

## Matthew 14 sermon, Tregear, 26.9.2021 - Fear and Faith; Power and Love

Four stories here. Remember Matthew is writing this account many years after Jesus' death and resurrection. He had told these stories and many other stories of his time with Jesus to countless people. In his Gospel he's only giving us some of the stories. Today there are 2 stories of rejection and two stories about faith and Jesus' power.

Imagine that you are a Christian reading this gospel for the first time. Why has Matthew included these stories? There are so many that he did not include. But, as the Holy Spirit led him to write, he included these to encourage the church, to help them understand what it means to follow Jesus; for Jesus to be the King of this new kingdom that he keeps talking about.

v.53 – 58 – Again Jesus is rejected. Previously it was the religious leaders who had rejected Jesus, even saying that he was empowered by Satan. This time at Nazareth, it's by his own fellow townspeople. Unlike many of the Pharisees and religious teachers, these people are amazed. And yet they respond in disbelief. This is the carpenter's son. We know his brothers and sisters; he must be just an ordinary man. What began as amazement becomes offense, they are offended by him. It's a foreshadowing of Jesus' final rejection and crucifixion. And the reminder that if Jesus is treated this way, how much more can we expect others to maybe be amazed at the message of Jesus but ultimately reject it. We should not be surprised; but it also shouldn't stop us from sharing the good news with others.

v.1 – 12 – Then Matthew tells us what's happening with Herod. He thinks that this Jesus that he's been hearing stories about might be the same John the Baptist come back from the dead. And so Matthew takes this opportunity to tell us about the death of John the Baptist. Here was a man of God who spoke the truth fearlessly. God didn't save him from Herod's weak giving in to Herodias' request. Again it's a foreshadowing of Jesus' death. And it's a reminder to those early Christians that this same fate might await them as they proclaim their trust in Jesus.

So we move on to 2 stories of faith and fear; power and compassion or love.

v.13 – 21 – feeding of 5000 – you may, as an early Christian, have heard the story of the feeding of the 5000. But let us look closely at Jesus in these 2 stories.

Jesus' reaction here, in v.13 and 14 is remarkable. He had lost John, his cousin, one guy who knew what Jesus was on about. He had lost him in a manner which must have warned Jesus of what lay ahead for him, too. Remember, Herod thought that Jesus was John come back to life – would Herod now go for Jesus as well. Maybe this is why Jesus slipped away to somewhere remote and quiet. Yet, when he slips away to be quiet and alone, the crowds discover and throng all around him. And his reaction is not anger or frustration, but compassion. He translates his sorrow over John, and perhaps his sorrow over himself and what lies ahead for him, into sorrow for them. Before Jesus does the outward and visible works of power, of healing the sick, comes the inward and invisible work of power, in which Jesus transforms his own feelings into love for those in need. This is the kind of love we've been thinking about over these last 2 weeks.

So here you are watching on, maybe you're one of the disciples. You see how Jesus cares for people, and you'd like to care for them too. So you think what might be best for them, and come to him with a suggestion. Look at v.15. <sup>15</sup> *As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."*

Wouldn't it be good to send them away now, so that they could go and buy food rather than all getting hungry here, miles away from anywhere?

Jesus is always delighted when people around him come up with ideas which show that they're thinking of the needs of others. But often what he has to do is to take those ideas and do something startling with them. If you really care for them, he says, why don't YOU give them something to eat? Jesus is giving us a task to do. Our small idea of how to care for

people gets bounced back at us with what seems a huge and impossible proposal. You protest. I can't do it! I haven't got the time. I haven't got the energy. I haven't got the ability. All I have is....five loaves and two fish.

Ah, but that's the next step, and again typical of how God's calling works. By hanging around Jesus, you've had an idea. It wasn't quite in focus, but your main intention – in this case, that the people should be fed – is on target. Jesus proposes achieving that aim by different means. You say it's impossible – *but you're prepared to give him the little you've got, if it'll be any good*. Of course, it means you'll go hungry yourself.... But by now you're in too deep to stop. Once the power of Jesus' compassion has begun to catch you up in its flow, you can't stop. What precisely Jesus does with what we give him is so mysterious and powerful that it's hard to describe in words. Imagine yourself standing there, while Jesus, surrounded by thousands of people, takes this pitifully small amount of food, hardly enough for 2 people, let alone a crowd, and prays over it. He thanks God for it. He breaks it, and gives it to you and the others, and you give it to....one person after another after another, without knowing what's happening or how, except there's just more to give out and some more and some more.

Think through how it's happened. Being close to Jesus has turned into the thought of service; Jesus takes the thought, turns it inside out (making it more costly, of course), and gives it back to you as a challenge. In puzzled response to the challenge, you offer what you've got, knowing it's quite inadequate (but again costly); and the same thing happens. He takes it, blesses it, and breaks it (there's the cost, yet again), and gives it to you – and your job now is to give it to everybody else.

This is how it works whenever someone is close enough to Jesus to catch a glimpse of what he's doing and how they could help. We blunder in with our ideas. We offer, unknowingly, what little we have. Jesus takes our ideas, loaves and fishes, money, a sense of humour, time, energy, talents, love, artistic gifts, skill with words, quickness of eye or fingers, whatever we have to offer. He holds them before his Father with prayer and blessing. Then, breaking them so they are ready to use, he gives them back to us to give to those who need them.

And now they are both ours and not ours. They are both what we had in mind and not what we had in mind. Something greater and different, more powerful and mysterious, yet also our own. It is part of genuine Christian service, at whatever level, that we look on in amazement to see what God has done with the bits and pieces we dug out of our meagre resources to offer him. I don't know what God's putting on your heart at this time. We're in the midst of Covid. Remember the early church that loved the people around them during the plagues or pandemics. What's God putting on our heart? How are we responding?

Within Matthew's story, of course, there is much more going on than simply a remarkable example of Christian vocation. The 12 baskets left over may point to Jesus' intention to restore God's people, the 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus feeding people in the wilderness fits so well with Matthew's theme of Jesus as the new Moses (God gave the Israelites manna, special bread from heaven, when they were in the desert in the time of Moses) that we can be sure that Matthew intended us to see this too.

This probably explains why Jesus sent the crowds away as soon as the feeding was over. v.22 - *Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.* He sent the disciples off immediately and didn't want the crowd hanging around and celebrating his power. In John's gospel we're told that the people wanted to make Jesus king by force. But Jesus was not intending to march through the land at the head of a great crowd, or to win military victories against God's enemies. He was going to achieve at last the loneliness he sought at the start of this passage, he would prepare himself for hanging desolate on a cross. If we sense a call to follow him, to share his compassion, to give him what we have so that it can be used in his service, we must remember that it cost him everything.

In John 6 we get more of the story after Jesus walks on water. The crowds follow him around to the other side of the lake and it's there that Jesus makes the amazing declaration, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry or thirsty." And he reminds them Your ancestors, that is the people who went through the desert with Moses, they ate the

manna and they all died. Jesus says to them, I am the bread that comes down from heaven. Eat me, in other words, learn from me, trust me, have faith in me. When you remain in me you will have real life. Read this chapter for yourselves this week. So much of what Jesus said we celebrate in our Lord's Supper each month. Let us remain in him; get all our food, all that we need from him.

In v.22 – 36 – Jesus walks on water. We are like the disciples in the boat. They had seen so much of Jesus' power. They had heard his teaching and prayed his prayer. But now they were stuck. Professional fishermen, they were struggling with the oars, unable to make headway against the wind. We, too, in our world have discovered so much, learned so much, invented so much, and yet are still without power to do many of the things that really matter. We have invented wonderful machines for making war, but nobody yet has found one that will make peace. We can put a man on the moon, but we can't put food into hungry stomachs. We can listen to the songs the whales sing on the ocean floor, but we can't hear the crying of human souls in the next street.

And there shimmering on the water, is a strange figure, walking towards us. Much of our world knows at least a little about Jesus; but he seems a ghostly image, a mirage or a fantasy, unrelated to us and our problems. Some find him frightening. Others wish he would go away and leave us alone. Even those who believe in him, as the disciples already did, didn't know what to expect from him. But he seems to be doing the impossible, and sometimes people get the idea that it would be good to copy him, if only we could. Some people set off with the aim of doing just that: to bring his love and power, his peace and hope, to the needy world.

But then they let their eyes drop for a moment to the waves. Remembering these are waves churning on the lake. Fear grips, there's a howling gale, it's dark. One man alone against the elements. That's what it often feels like when you try to bring God's love and healing power into the wild night of the world. That's when we need to hear, once more, Jesus' words- a combination, as so often, of rebuke and encouragement: "Is that really how much faith you

have? Why all this doubt?" The moment when we are most strongly tempted to give up is probably the moment when help is, if only we knew it, just a step away.

That's what it's like for each of us in Christian discipleship, again and again. As far as we know, walking on water in the literal sense wasn't something the early Christians expected to do themselves. Paul, facing another shipwreck, never imagined that getting out of the boat and strolling off to the shore, walking on the water, was a viable option. So it's likely that Matthew expects his readers to 'hear' this story in terms of their own journey of faith – and their own struggles with doubt.

There are many times when Jesus asks us to do what seems impossible. How can we even begin to do the task he's called us to? How can we even think of doing without that sin which we're asked to give up? How can we really suppose we might be able to develop a serious habit of prayer when we're so frantic and disorganised?

Of course, if like Peter we look at the waves being lashed by the wind, we will conclude that it is indeed impossible. What we are called to do – it's so basic and obvious, but so hard to do in practice – is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and our ears open for his encouragement (even if it does contain some rebuke as well). And our wills and hearts must be ready to do what he says, even if it seems crazy at the time.

Fear and faith; power and love. So often we're a mix of fear and faith aren't we? I trust you Lord, but sometimes as I look around me or at my circumstances fear creeps in. Help me to keep my eyes on you. Take my little faith, use it to accomplish your glory.

You, Lord Jesus, so powerful, able to do anything. Yet so full of love and compassion. Our Father who loves us dearly. The waves of life's troubles can break against us, but we are safe with our Father. We may be rescued, but, like John the Baptist, we may not be rescued, but, but we are safe in his hold.

**Pray:**

Dear Father, thank you that you hold us safe. Thank you that you love us with a great love.

Dear Jesus, thank you that you showed your power. We CAN trust you for anything in our lives. Thank you that you showed us how to truly love, even when you were filled with sadness and were tired.

Holy Spirit, help us to keep our eyes fixed on you. Give us wills and hearts ready to obey you.  
We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen