



At the point of deepest need

Matthew 14:22-33

One thing that I learned about Australia when we first arrived in August 2005 is that the months of August and September can be very windy, so I understand when we go to the nightly weather forecast that the winds are a prevailing factor to note.

Here in Matthew's Gospel, the disciples were certainly facing and had to overcome a contrary wind. They faced a fiercely opposing wind on the Sea of Galilee. But before we look at the incident itself, let's put the passage into its context.

- We have had a concentration of parables in recent chapters
- We then have the 'feeding of the crowd'
- This account is not unique to Matthew, but there are some distinctive aspects as the account is told.

We remind ourselves that Jesus refused to send the crowd away in preparation for the feeding of the multitude, but now we reach an occasion when he sends the crowd away (14:22). The dismissal of the crowd enables Jesus to send the disciples ahead of him—and it also opens up his time of prayer.

There are many things we could focus upon in this passage and we shall touch on some of them. But for me it is important to ask what would this account have to say to a developing early church; perhaps one which is under pressure.

Some writers have tried to make a link between the incident recorded here and the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. I take a rather different view and see this as one of the ways in which Jesus continued to teach the disciples. Whilst it is true that only after the resurrection would they fully understand the Person of Christ, it is clearly another step on the journey for Peter and the first disciples.

Following the account of the feeding of the five thousand, the focus shifts from the wilderness to the sea. Both are vehicles for demonstrating the way God has guided his people.

- There is the provision in the desert
- There is the deliverance through the waters.

Some scholars see this account as two stories woven together: one is the account of walking on the water; and the other the storm-calming miracle. I think they are intricately bound together.

I offer you three aspects which I hope are helpful to all of us:

There are times to be alone (v. 23)

Following the miracle of the feeding of the crowd, Jesus told the disciples to get into the boat and go ahead. There is now no difficulty in him dismissing them, for the crowds are satisfied and it is appropriate that he should send them away.

A close examination of the three accounts in Matthew, Mark and John explain why things happened in the way they did and why it was that Jesus sent the disciples ahead of him.



- Matthew suggests that Jesus needs to be alone to pray (v.23)
- Mark proposes that he needed a distance between himself and the crowds (Mark 6:31-32)
- John offers the thought that he may have to face the uproar of the crowd (John 6:15).

There are times in all our lives when we need to be alone and some people find their own company more helpful than others. When alone, some turn on the radio or must have the television for company. I recall, when I explored this passage on another occasion, I came across the thought of one writer who described such people in this way: "To be alone, for them, is to be in doubtful company."

I believe it is important to recognise that Jesus knew what it was to be tired. It is a sign of his humanity and, when we look at what has gone before, it had been a very long day. For Jesus to be alone was not that unhealthy isolation which we at Wesley Mission help people to handle, but a strengthening experience.

It could be contended that the strength of the Christian life depends upon our ability to find moments of appropriate aloneness with God.

It is only a matter of a couple of months ago that I stood among the mountains that surround Lake Galilee. Mountains hold a very powerful place throughout scripture:

- Moses was given the Law on a mountainside
- Jesus would agonise for his people on a mountainside
- The Great Commission of Jesus, which comes at the end of this gospel, took place on a mountain.

For many years, I had responsibility for the pastoral care of Christian leaders. I regularly met with them to talk about their ministry and what underpinned their daily lives. A conversation about a man's journey has stuck with me over the years.

This leader had reached a moment of crisis in his life. In the midst of this crisis, he lost his wife and family. It was a most distressing time for him. He had sabbatical time available to him and so he chose to journey to the Holy Land: he travelled from Jerusalem to Jericho and then up to the very isolated Greek convent on the Mount of Temptation, above Jericho in the west. The name of the convent, *Quruntul*, comes from the Latin meaning 'forty days'. Of course, this relates to the time Jesus spent in the wilderness.

My colleague spent over a month camping near the convent, in a very stark environment, with no direct contact with people, except food from the religious community at *Quruntul*. It was a very spiritually and emotionally refreshing and empowering time for him. He talked about the times when the silence of the night was so loud—a sound he had never heard before. The experience helped him to return to Europe, equipped to face the challenges of his daily ministry and work.

We all need moments of refreshment and renewal. Amid the pressures of his own ministry, Jesus made space for quiet and prayer. We remind ourselves that this came in contrast to a previous attempt when the crowds would not allow him to find solitude.

There is, therefore, a powerful emphasis upon the importance of solitude and prayer in this passage. But there is one further point about this experience of Jesus that needs to be revisited.



It is from this place on the mountainside that Jesus is able to see the disciples in their distress. We are told that the boat was a considerable distance from the shore and the wind was against it. However, Jesus was viewing the situation from a significant vantage point.

Could it be that prayer and devotion gives us a unique vantage point from which we can view the world? I think it is one of the reasons why I believe Wesley Mission's unique proposition as a provider of help can be pursued. I would explain this in terms of:-

- To really help people, it is healthy to have a distance between ourselves and the challenges we face
- Prayer provides us with a spiritual perspective when we are facing need that might easily overwhelm us
- I have to be careful how I articulate this, but we could say that we see beyond our own limited perspective and observe things from God's viewpoint.

Mother Teresa was being interviewed by a journalist who asked her, "When you are praying, what do you say to God?"

Her answer shocked him, as she said, "I don't say anything; I just listen."

He followed the question up with another enquiry. "Oh! And when you listen, what does he say to you?"

Her answer was, "He doesn't say anything. He just listens as well. And if you don't understand that, I can't explain it to you."

There were no further questions!

The storms of life can cause distress

(v.v. 24 and 26)

There are two essential factors about this storm: one is the nature of the storm itself; and, secondly, it happens at night and Jesus walked on the water shortly before dawn.

We remind ourselves that many of these disciples were fishermen and they would be familiar with the experience of inland lakes and seas—that is their susceptibility to storms which occur with little warning.

On our recent filming trip on Galilee, we were approaching Capernaum by sea and we wanted to film from a very different angle. However, the experienced captain was quite clear that there were only certain approaches that could be made because of the strong wind which we were never sure of.

So the disciples are struggling at night against a stormy sea. What can this say to us?

- Just as nature can serve up a contrary wind without any warning, so life can bring about experiences and moments that are unplanned and difficult. Pain and sorrow can come from nowhere and such experiences are not predictable.
- Where the wind comes from or the where the difficulties arise in our lives is really not the issue, but rather it is how we handle them that is important.
- That the disciples experience terror is, I think, significant—particularly in view of the fact that only recently they had seen Jesus feed the great crowd! Their trembling hands speak powerfully.



As I indicated earlier, one of the issues we deal with whenever we turn to the gospels (particularly in this kind of context) is to ask what the passage has to say in the broader setting of the early life of the church.

Michael Green writes persuasively about the mission and life of the early church and, in his commentary on Matthew, he brings this to bear when he concludes: “It is not possible to question the value of the story to the Christian community for which Matthew wrote. It was a pattern both of unbelief and of faith. But storms often beset them, and fear chilled them. In his power they could for a while do what would otherwise have been impossible—until they considered what they were doing and reflected on the size of the waves. Then, of course, they would begin to sink—until they cried out to the Son of God for his powerful hand to catch them and hold them up.”

We are living through days of great challenge for those who have little. I have just written my Mission Council Report and drawn attention to the fact that not only do we have 105,000 homeless people in Australia, but also we have 1.3 million households that are living with housing needs. It is little wonder that such people feel that life is caving in on them.

In the work of Wesley Mission, we are committed to working with children and young people. We know all too well what happens with young lives when trust breaks down. The whole area of abuse by parents and other adults results in enormous damage in the lives of young people. Such damage can journey with them throughout the whole of their lives.

The terror of the disciples is a result of their misinterpreting Jesus’ approach to them. They perceive him as a ghost. Often terror and distress come from the moments of misunderstanding in our lives.

When I think of periods of distress in the storms of life, it isn’t long before my memory takes me back to the North Wales coast, where I ministered for nine years. Late one Saturday evening, news reached me of a small boy who became separated from his father on the sandbanks in the estuary between Llandudno and Conwy. Sadly his life was lost, and the most disturbing pastoral aspect of this encounter was that his father could hear his son calling out to him, even though he could not see him. Storms of life do indeed present themselves to us and are so very difficult to handle.

Jesus Christ is Lord of the wind and waves

(v.v. 27 and 32)

The whole passage is full of vivid imagery. The picture of the disciples sent on their own across troubled seas and Jesus walking on the water to save them has spoken to Christians over the generations.

Since *The Enlightenment*, those studying the New Testament have struggled with what are often called *The Nature Miracles*. But I think they have so much to say to us. In the sense that the feeding of the five thousand was a gift to the many, Jesus walking on the water is a gift to those who would be leaders within the life of the earliest church.

Fear is the recurring theme. The phrases ‘terrified’, ‘cried in fear’, ‘do not be afraid’ and ‘became frightened’ all occur in the short space of eleven verses.

There are different ways in which this fear expresses itself.



I am certain that if we were to use the word “fear” and each of us were to make a contribution to what that looks like for them, we would find nearly as many different responses as there are people.

If this account in the New Testament was a Greek tragedy and fear was a character, “fear” would leave the stage several times to change masks:

- The first mask would display sheer terror, as the disciples see Jesus walking towards them. We might think of this as the fear of the unknown or the fear that is present during challenges in our lives.
- There may well be the fear that Peter experiences as he moves towards Jesus.
- The final mask might show fear mingled with distraction as Peter’s attention is drawn from Jesus to the waves that are crashing around him. When Peter notices the wind, the fear of his situation diminishes his faith.

One writer asked the question, “How many characters are there in the story?” Now it’s a trick question, because all the disciples are present of course. But he suggested that there are just three: Jesus, who speaks and acts; Peter, who speaks and acts; and the disciples who speak and act as one. The eleven disciples are treated as one voice in Matthew’s account.

William H Willimon may have put it best in a sermon he preached entitled “How will you know if it’s Jesus?”

“If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on a sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture.”

Clifton Kirkpatrick concluded, “Getting out of the boat with Jesus is the most risky, most exciting and most fulfilling way to live life to the fullest.”

This encounter in Matthew’s Gospel invites us to do just that!