

prayer, faith and divine rescue

a sermon preached on the
ninth sunday after Pentecost

10 August 2014

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by mother emily fraser

the lections: Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105: 1-6, 16-22; Romans 10: 4-15; Matthew 14: 22-36

Today's Gospel reading presents us with a miracle - Jesus walking on the water - and in it we can look at how both Jesus and the disciples responded to this strange and mysterious event.

But let's begin on the shore of the lake, where Jesus and his disciples and the crowds have gathered.

Jesus, having spent time teaching the crowds and seeing to their needs in the miraculous feeding from five loaves and two fish, Jesus seeks some time in solitude and prayer. He leaves the crowds, goes away with the disciples, and then goes away to the mountain by himself for some time.

Jesus spent time in prayer, exploring his own relationship with God. From this we can learn that amid the busyness of his own life, Jesus understood the need for and necessity of prayer and the importance of stillness in devotion. He could have made his prayer a public spectacle, where thousands would have joined him and followed his example, but he chose to maintain this as a private and deeply personal practice. We can learn much about this for our own practices of prayer, with Jesus as our guide and example.

And when Jesus returns to the disciples, hours later, their boat has drifted away from the shore. Jesus walks to them, walking over the water and the disciples are terrified, not understanding what they're seeing, crying out that they think they're seeing a ghost, some kind of spirit. But it is Jesus. He walks across the water and his first words to them are words of reassurance.

And then there's the moment between Peter and Jesus. Peter speaks to Jesus from the boat, and in response to his words, Jesus calls Peter out to him, and Peter obeys, walking out onto the water towards Christ. When he begins to fear, he begins to sink and calls out to Jesus to save him, which he does.

What are we to make of all this?

If we take it too literally, Jesus becomes an on-call rescuer whenever we need one. Nothing would be our fault - if things go wrong, we'd call in our super-heroic Jesus to redeem us.

I've heard it said that Christianity is a religion of rescue, but that's a risky idea. It isn't a rescue in terms of absolving us from responsibilities for our actions and being something on which we can rely for solutions and miracles when things go pear-shaped, but I do think of it as a kind of rescue in terms of allowing us to find something greater than ourselves by which our lives are given meaning.

So we can look at Jesus' interaction with Peter and learn something of both Jesus and God.

Peter begins to walk towards Jesus but is overwhelmed with fear from the violence of the wind and the sea. In his fear, Peter begins to sink and calls out for Jesus to help. Jesus reaches out, his compassion and love for Peter remains constant.

To my mind, this moment speaks to the infinite patience of God and of Christ with human nature. No matter how many times we may try and flounder and fail and fall, God and Christ will extend the metaphorical hand to support us and bear us up, time after time.

And this is more than an individual thing - when humanity makes mistake after mistake, fails to change and grow and mature, God and Christ will not turn their back, but continue to reach out that hand to us, to bring us back into the boat and to safety. And that is a comforting thought for us to carry as we live out our lives, and it is present with us in many ways.

The reaching out of that hand of comfort, of companionship and friendship, is expressed in the Eucharist, in the sharing of the bread and wine, where we all gather together and are both physically and spiritually fed as the Body of Christ.

So, from this story of prayer, of miracles, of fear and crying out in need, we are reminded that our lives as Christians will not always go according to plan (that's like Peter's moment of sinking) but that whatever does happen, Christ is not absent, is not ignoring us and has not abandoned us, but is beside us, journeying with us, as our guide and example in whom we can hope and trust. To me, that's the deeper meaning of his reaching out to Peter when he was sinking in the waters of the lake.

curate.emily@stjohnscamberwell.org.au