

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE - SUNDAY 9th AUGUST 2020

INTRODUCTION

I wonder if you can remember what it felt like when you learnt to ride a bicycle? Perhaps you had stabilisers to begin with or maybe you just threw yourself into it with wild abandon? If you did have stabilisers, perhaps you can remember the moment you realised they were going to have to come off.

If you wobbled to the left or to the right, the stabilisers would no longer be there to support you. But I expect for most of us, there was someone calling us on and encouraging us.

*And that's exactly what Jesus does with Peter in our Gospel reading today. Jesus calls Peter from the relative comfort and safety of the boat and Peter has to put his absolute trust in him. There is nothing to hold onto to keep him afloat should he start to sink, **but** his trust in Jesus.*

Isn't that just what Jesus does to us sometimes? He calls us on and he calls us out. Out of our comfortable places and into unchartered waters. Just like Peter, having embarked on his journey across the sea, we too can feel panicked or frightened, but Jesus holds us up just like he held Peter up, even when it feels as though we might be sinking.

So pause for a moment to remember that, however battered you may feel by the storms of life, even if you feel you are

sinking, God is with you now, ready to hold you up if you will trust Him.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Lord, speak to us

That we may hear your word.

Move among us

That we may behold your glory.

Receive our prayers

That we may learn to trust you.

TURNING TO GOD

God our Father,
we come to you in sorrow for our sins.
For turning away from you,
and ignoring your will for our lives;
Father, forgive us:
save us and help us.

For behaving just as we wish,
without thinking of you;
Father, forgive us:
save us and help us.

For failing you by what we do,
and think and say;
Father, forgive us:
save us and help us.

For letting ourselves be drawn away from you
by temptations in the world about us;
Father, forgive us:
save us and help us.

For living as if we were ashamed
to belong to your Son;
Father, forgive us:
save us and help us.

May the God of love
bring us back to himself,
forgive us our sins,
and assure us of his eternal love
In Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Silence

Blessed is the Lord
For he has heard the voice of our prayer;
Therefore shall our hearts dance for joy
And in our song will we praise our god.

THE CHURCH'S PRAYER FOR TODAY

Gracious Father,
revive your church in our day,
and make her holy,
strong and faithful,
for your glory's sake
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

LISTENING TO THE WORD

NEW TESTAMENT READING (Romans 10:5-15 *New Living Translation*)

For Moses writes that the law's way of making a person right with God requires obedience to all of its commands. But faith's way of getting right with God says, "Don't say in your heart, 'Who will go up to heaven?' (to bring Christ down to earth). And don't say, 'Who will go down to the place of the dead?' (to bring Christ back to life again)." In fact, it says,

"The message is very close at hand;
it is on your lips and in your heart."

And that message is the very message about faith that we preach: If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, "How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!"

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING (Matthew 14:22-33 NRSV)

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was

there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION (by Andy Todd)

Down through the centuries, one of the most enduring symbols for the Church has been of a boat on the sea of the world with its mast in the form of a cross. Since 1948 this has been the logo of the World Council of Churches. This image of the Church as a boat is a permanent feature of most church

buildings: the central part of a traditional Church is the 'nave', derived from the Latin word for 'ship' or 'boat' (*navis*). Generations of schoolchildren have sat in Church pews and been told to look upwards at the ceiling with its rafters, and asked, "What does that remind you of?" Answer: "The inside of a boat." (The only problem with the image is that it resembles a boat which has capsized!)

It's a powerful picture. It speaks of the Church as a place of safety amid the storms of life. It reminds us that God does not always take His people **out of** the storms, but preserves them **through** the storms.

So why on earth would God's people ever consider getting **out of** the boat and **into** the storm?

The only answer could ever be: if that is where Jesus himself is. And that, of course, is the point of the amazing encounter we have just witnessed between Jesus and Peter.

Jesus clearly had in mind to show the disciples something special. In St Mark's telling of the same event, Jesus makes as if to "pass by", using standard Old Testament language for a special appearing of God's glory. I suspect Jesus was hoping the disciples would dare to ask to join him. It is Peter who takes the hint - Peter, the professional fisherman who has spent his life in boats, learning to the core of his being that

the only safe place to be in a storm is inside the boat, but who nevertheless puts one foot over the edge, then the other, and begins to walk across the waves.

Why would Jesus want the disciples to do this? To help them to learn the same lesson that he spent his entire ministry trying to teach them: to place their trust in him alone. Not in themselves or their capabilities; not in money, or power, or in the self-appointed leaders or saviours or gurus of the world; not even in the trappings of religion. But in Him.

It's the same lesson that God spent most of the Old Testament trying to teach the people of Israel. It's the same lesson that we heard St Paul trying to help the Christians in Rome understand.

It's the same lesson for you and me today. When all is said and done, real security is to found in God alone, so don't spend your life putting your trust elsewhere. Learn to live in daily, hourly dependence on God.

And sometimes, the only way to learn that lesson is to get out of the boat.

Like a child needing to have the stabilisers removed from their bicycle before they can ride. Like a young bird needing to be pushed from the nest in order to fly. You and I may need to

leave the boat of our comfort zone to learn to keep our eyes fixed firmly on Jesus.

I remember vividly the terror I felt as I waited in the Cathedral crypt before my ordination service. The only thing which got me through it was a mental image of keeping my eyes fixed on Jesus as Peter did when he crossed the waves.

It has been wonderful during Lockdown to see the people of this Church community willing to leave their comfort zones and try new things. Some have led Bible readings for the first time; others have led prayers; for quite a few, joining a Zoom service or talking to others in a Chat Room has meant leaving their comfort zone. Others have learnt to pray or read the Bible at home more regularly than before, or have dared to pick up the phone to someone they had seen in Church but never spoken to. Wherever you have taken the risk of leaving comfort zones for the love of God, that is an example of getting out of the boat.

But in recent weeks my thoughts and prayers keep coming back to how we, as a Church family, might need to step outside the boat of our comfort zones in the months ahead. Perhaps like never before it feels like we are in the middle of a storm which has left none of us untouched. The overwhelming temptation is to want to huddle in the boat, to look to the familiarity of Church and “the way things were” for safety and

security. Perhaps this should alert us to the possibility that, though the storms may still be raging, Jesus might be gently calling us as a Church to follow him outside the boat?

The PCC has been using these questions to reflect on the experience of the past four months:

- *What have we as a Church gained that we would happily lose when Lockdown ends?*
- *What have we gained that we want to keep?*
- *What have we lost and want to get back?*
- *What have we lost that we feel no need to get back?*

I suspect that if as a Church community – individually and together – we attend prayerfully to questions like these, we may hear the voice of Jesus inviting us to leave some cherished comfort zones and to strike out in directions which will help us learn to trust him more. Why would we do that? Only if that is where we see Jesus is himself at work. In particular, we should remind ourselves over and over that Jesus was forever ‘out there’ seeking those who felt lost or had been told they were beyond God’s love. He was forever venturing outside the boat. How can we be a Church that dares to follow where he goes?

We will in all likelihood make mistakes. Peter took his eyes off the Lord and began to sink. But do you think for a minute that

Jesus would rather he had stayed in the boat? Do you think for a minute Peter would rather have stayed in the boat?

We should be rightly grateful for the boat God has given us, the Church in which God brings us through the storms of life, however hard they may be raging.

But we will never stop needing to learn the lesson of finding our true security in Him alone. And that may involve us having to take some faltering but trusting steps outside the boat of our comfort zone. To borrow a phrase from the American pastor and writer John Ortberg, "If you want to walk on water, ***you've got to get out of the boat!***"

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Do you believe and trust in God the Father,
source of all being and life,
the one for whom we exist?

We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Son,
who took our human nature,
died for us and rose again?

We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit,
who gives life to the people of God
and makes Christ known in the world?

We believe and trust in him.

This is the faith of the Church.

This is our faith.

**We believe and trust in one God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

Amen.

Pause for Reflection – Lead us, Heavenly Father, Lead us

Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
o'er the world's tempestuous sea;
guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
for we have no help but thee;
yet possessing every blessing,
if our God our Father be.

Spirit of our God, descending,
fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
love with every passion blending,
pleasure that can never cloy:
thus provided, pardoned, guided,
nothing can our peace destroy.

TALKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Trusting in our faithful God, let us pray.
Faithful God, we pray for the gift
of deeper faith in you,
so that we trust you in a way
that alters our dependence on everything else,
and allows us clearer vision
as to the direction and role of the church.
Remind us that it is your church and not ours:
your work, your power and your kingdom.

Silence

Lord our God
Let only your will be done.

Faithful God, as we call to mind
the stormy areas of our world,
the raging and the insecurity,
the confusion and bewilderment,
the restlessness and fear,
let your calming and reassuring presence
be sensed and recognised,
bringing peace and goodness,
righteousness and hope.

Silence

Lord our God
Let only your will be done.

Faithful God, come to us in the storms of life,
when we let one another down,
mishandle opportunities
and come to the end of our strength and patience;
Bless us with the love that never lets us down.

Silence

Lord our God
Let only your will be done.

Faithful God, comfort and heal
all who feel they are in the midst of the storm,
especially all who are suffering in body, mind or spirit.
From our own community, prayers are asked for: Anna
Clements.

And in a moment now we offer you the people on our own
hearts.

Silence

Lord our God
Let only your will be done.

Faithful God, we place into your loving keeping
all those who have died,
knowing their dependence on you
and your limitless mercy.

We remember those who have recently departed: Sheila King,
Flo Davidson, and Ken Bowkett.
And those whose anniversary of death falls at this time:
George Lawrence, Anne Graham, Rowland Humphries, Peggy
Belton, Hazel Chinn, Owen Laws, Alison Hargrave.

We thank you for them and for their gifts in the world,
and ask that we may, in our turn,
come to you across the waters of death
And live in your company for ever.

Silence

Lord our God
Let only your will be done.

Faithful God, whose promises stand sure for ever,
We thank you for your patience with us
And your refusal to give up on us.

Silence

Lord our God

Let only your will be done.

We pray the Lord's Prayer together as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily
bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who
sin against us.
Lead us not into
temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the
power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**Our Father, who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our
trespasses,
as we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And lead us not into
temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

Merciful Father,
**Accept these prayers
For the sake of your Son,
Our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Responding to God's Invitation - Will you Come and Follow Me?

Will you come and follow me
If I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
And never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
Will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown
In you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind
If I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind
And never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
Should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer
In you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true
When you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you
And never be the same.
In your company I'll go
Where your love and footsteps show.

Thus I'll move and live and grow
In you and you in me.

FOLLOWING CHRIST INTO THE WORLD

Our worship is ended, and as we go out into the world, our service now begins.

The Lord God almighty is our Father:
he loves us and tenderly cares for us.

The Lord Jesus Christ is our Saviour:
he has redeemed us and will defend us to the end.

The Lord, the Holy Spirit, is among us:
**he will lead us in God's holy way.
To God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be praise and glory today and for ever.
Amen.**

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