

A Different World Is Possible: Walking on Water and the Life of Faith

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Matthew 14.22-33; Romans 10.5-15

If you were with us last Sunday, you will have heard Canon Neil preach on the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Today I get to preach on the miracle that directly follows it: Jesus walking on the water.

These two stories are remarkable, not only for their memorable subject matter, but also for the prominence they are given by the Gospel writers. The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle, apart from the resurrection, that appears in all four Gospels. And the story of Jesus walking on water features in three of the four.

In all three, the two stories occur together: first, the hungry crowd is fed; then, as the disciples struggle against wind and waves, Jesus comes to their aid, walking on the water (Matthew 14.13-33; Mark 6.30-52; John 6.1-21). The consistent pairing of these stories is not simply a matter of narrative sequence. There is nothing in the content of one that inevitably leads to the other. They are, I believe, paired because together they tell us something fundamental about faith.

The miracles they describe both occur in answer to human need: the need for food and the need for safety. They have not found their way into the Gospels simply to display Jesus's supernatural powers. And this is true of Jesus's miracles more broadly: they serve the purposes of healing, restoring life and expressing God's compassion and love. But the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on water also have something to tell us about faith: about what faith looks like when we feel powerless in the face of human need, when we deem it impossible that it

can be met. They challenge what we believe is possible, and in much more complex ways, I think, than simply in terms of what the laws of physics allow. The issue is not simply that Jesus, with his supernatural powers, can do what mere mortals cannot. Nor is it that, if only we had enough faith, we too could perform feats that defy the laws of physics. The deeper question is whether the limits of what we believe is possible have become the limits of how we imagine not only who God is, but what God's world could be like.

In Matthew's Gospel, these two episodes form part of a larger group of stories that sits between two of Jesus's great teaching discourses. Matthew, alongside stories *about* Jesus, contains five large sections of Jesus's teaching, commonly called 'discourses'. (The Sermon on the Mount is one such discourse.) The feeding of the five thousand and the walking on water are among the stories between the third discourse, which concerns the kingdom of God (Matthew 13), and the fourth, which is concerned particularly with life together as a community of disciples (Matthew 18). Jesus has been proclaiming a Kingdom in which God's purposes are different from those of the kingdoms of this world. And now Matthew shows us something of what living by those Kingdom values makes possible: the hungry are fed (Matthew 14.16-20); those in trouble at sea are rescued (Matthew 14.27); the sick are healed (Matthew 14.34-36).

And then comes the question that the discourse following these stories will ask: what do these stories mean for those who are called to be the Church? What can the Church do for the world? Is it really so preposterous to believe that a world shaped by the values of God's Kingdom is possible?

Jesus sees a hungry crowd and refuses the logic that says there is simply not enough. He does not tell the disciples to accept what appears to them to be reality: that the crowd is too numerous and the problem too large. The disciples look at what they have, and see, quite realistically, insufficiency. Jesus shows them

what becomes possible when that same reality is seen through the eyes of faith. 'They need not go away,' he says. 'You give them something to eat' (Matthew 14.16). And from five loaves and two fish, the crowd is fed (Matthew 14.17-20).

And then comes the second story, the one we heard in our Gospel reading this morning. The disciples are in a boat, far from land. The wind is against them. The waves are battering them. And then, in the darkness before dawn, they see Jesus coming towards them, walking on the water. They are terrified. And Jesus says: 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid' (Matthew 14.27).

And here Matthew does something that neither Mark nor John do in their versions of this story. Matthew gives Peter a part in the miracle: Peter, too, walks on the water. And yet Peter remains Peter. He feels the wind. He becomes afraid. He begins to sink. Faith does not make him superhuman. Just as doubt does not place him beyond saving. Jesus reaches out and catches him (Matthew 14.28-31). Faith is not certainty. It is not the absence of fear. It is the possibility of seeing beyond what fear tells us is possible.

This matters, because there have been many moments in history when people were told that a different world was not possible. That slavery could not end. That racial segregation could not be overcome. That apartheid could not be dismantled. And yet people dared to imagine otherwise. The abolitionist Olaudah Equiano believed that slavery could end and worked towards that end. Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of a different future for a racially divided America. Desmond Tutu, along with countless others, imagined a post-apartheid South Africa and helped to make it a reality.

All three were Christians, and two were Christian ministers. They looked directly at suffering and injustice and refused to accept them as the final word.

That is not naïve optimism. The storm is real. The injustice is real. The hunger is real. The fear, too, is real. But faith can say: this is not the only possible world.

And that is where Paul's words to the Romans belong beside our Gospel reading. Paul names something Peter had to learn firsthand: faith is trust in the word that calls us forward. 'The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart', says Paul (Romans 10.8), echoing Deuteronomy (30.14). And that word cannot remain private. It must be proclaimed, carried from one person to another: 'How are they to hear without someone to proclaim?' Paul asks (Romans 10.14).

And then he adds, quoting Isaiah: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' (Romans 10.15; Isaiah 52.7). In Isaiah, those feet belong to messengers announcing peace and proclaiming that captivity is ending. The Gospel, the good news, moves on foot.

If the feeding of the five thousand asks us to imagine a world where human need is met, and the walking on water a world where fear does not determine our action, Paul reminds us that such a world is made possible through people willing to carry the good news into the world: people like Olaudah Equiano, Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu — and people like you.

The Gospel asks us not to mistake what is for what can be. Peter sees the wind, becomes afraid, and begins to sink. But for a moment, he stepped beyond what he thought was possible. And perhaps that is what faith looks like: not denying the storm, not pretending that we are fearless, not believing that we will never falter, but taking the next step towards the world God calls us to imagine: a world where the hungry are fed, those in trouble at sea are rescued, and injustice is no longer accepted as inevitable.

A different world is possible.

And the Church is called not only to proclaim that good news, but to walk it into being — one step, and then another — trusting that the world as it is, is not the limit of what God can make possible.

‘Come,’ says Jesus, extending his hand. And we take the step.

Amen.