**Matthew 14, 22-33**

**22**Immediately he made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. **23**And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, **24**but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. **25**And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. **26**But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. **27**But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

**28**Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” **29**He said, “Come.” So, Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. **30**But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” **31**Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” **32**When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. **33**And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Let us pray:

Steadfast God, even in the midst of our complaining, you feed us generously. Even in the midst of the storms of life, you meet us in Jesus, inviting us to 'come, follow'. Strengthen our faith in you, that we may shoulder our human burdens gracefully. With Jesus we pray. Amen.

The story of Jesus’ walking on water is well documented in three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark and John. But Matthew provides by far the fullest account, and it is the only one to include the information about Peter’s walking on the water to meet Jesus.

The texts that lead up to the reading show that Jesus has been busy. It has been an exhausting day. They have just learned of John the Baptist’s execution, which would have greatly affected Jesus, given John’s importance to him; and what, with feeding some five thousand with just a few fish and loaves, he needed a rest. Amongst this continual pressure of Jesus’ ministry, he takes the time out and finds a place to pray. He made deliberate plans to escape both the disciples, and the crowds in order to be alone. I can understand that as I have often escaped the world on a Sunday afternoon and curled up with a good book. Of course, the tradition in our house is a late afternoon interruption by the dogs who have fixed views on when it is time for a walk, so the rest time can be significantly curtailed by their wishes.

In the meantime, the disciples were having a little bit of trouble with their boat, struggling with the changing conditions out on the water, and at this point, their energy had possibly fallen to a dangerously low point. Morning dawned and Jesus decided to join them in the boat. He was unimpaired by any normal earthly physical limitations, so he took a shortcut across the top of the water. Much could be made of this move on Jesus’ part. It was truly a significant revelation of his powers to do this. Up until now his use of the holy gifts was primarily in the service of healing others. Well, there was an exception with the wedding at Cana, but like the other guests, he was probably thirsty too. This latest episode came as a surprise to the disciples who had seen everything lately, or so they thought.

They had already seen Jesus demonstrating the power of the Kingdom of God as he healed the blind, the lame, the deaf, and set people free from the possession of the Devil. Jesus had showed the aforementioned Kingdom by proclaiming a prophetic concern for the outcast and marginalised, giving hope for the poor, comfort for the grieving, forgiveness for the broken. They had not forgotten their fear of the tumultuous conditions previously when Jesus was actually in the boat calming the waves, but now Jesus actually turned up outside the boat, walking on the water towards them. Perhaps Jesus was now prepared to let them see just how limitless the power of God can be.

As the weather conditions had changed dramatically, quite apart from their surprise at seeing him walk on water, as he approached the boat, there were cries of fear and alarm about the boat difficulties they were in. It is small wonder that at the sight of Jesus walking on the water, while they were struggling with the rough weather conditions that they were terrified. They thought that he must have been a ghost. This was not an unreasonable reaction, considering this was not a common everyday event. This new party trick was right up there with turning water into wine!

Once again Jesus had this bunch of unlikely lads he called his disciples, that often seemed to need his help. In those days, they didn’t have weather forecasts available, and the only knowledge they had of the impending weather that morning was some old shepherd who kept muttering about a red sky in the morning! Jesus came to them in their distress, and, always the patient and compassionate one, he comforted the disciples by saying “take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

These words unlocked something in Peter. He was the bold one, the guy completely devoted to Jesus, and always wanting to be up front. But he needed a bit more assurance that he was encountering the holy and not playing tricks in his own mind. However, always the daring one with a lot of trust in Jesus, this time he sought some proof with an unusual request; Peter requested, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”  Jesus obliged him with the instruction, “Come.” So, with an enormous amount of courage, and a great deal of faith, Peter got out of the boat, and to his amazement, he started walking on the water, as he moved toward Jesus.  He hadn’t really asked for supernatural powers, he just wanted to do whatever Jesus commanded and he was willing to risk his life in the process. Jesus had made this possible.

But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and basically, he took his eye off the ball and lost faith. Consequently, as he began to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”  Jesus immediately obliged, reaching out his hand he caught him, and with a mild admonishment, he said to Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they both got into the boat, the wind ceased, and to quote Matthew, those in the boat worshipped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God”.

The heart of this incident for Matthew was the interchange with Peter and his walking on water, sinking and being rescued. This intrusion into the story between the initial disclosure of Jesus trying to get some peace and quiet, and his intervention resulting in the dying down of the winds, becomes the climax and focal point of Matthew’s account of the incident. The passage concludes with Jesus and Peter in the boat, the wind dying down, and the other disciples somewhat stunned at what they had just witnessed.

The issue here is a lesson in discipleship to us all. Jesus gently chastised his disciples for their little faith. The lesson is quite clear; the Lord is always present with us in our times of distress, he bids us to come to him, but we must walk by faith with our eyes steadfastly fixed on the Lord. When we fail, as we so often do, if we call out to him, he will surely raise us up and draw us to himself. Had Peter not doubted, he would hardly have been a human, and certainly not a mentor for those of us who take one tentative and struggling faith step at a time. His doubts were less an intellectual uncertainty about what he was experiencing, rather, it was a reversion to human fear in a time of danger, instead of confidence in Jesus’ call that he would be safe. Matthew’s account of the incident also shows that the disciple’s faith was changed by the encounter. Matthew intended that we too, all of us, must have faith, we must keep our eye directly on Jesus. When we are sinking in spirits, or challenged in any way, he will lift us up with the presence and the power of God, taking us to a safe place with him.

Amen