

**SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND JONATHAN ANDREW**  
**AT 8 AND 10AM SERVICES OF HOLY COMMUNION,**  
**10 AUGUST 2008, 12<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY**

**Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33**

“... you of little faith, why did you doubt”

Am I alone in feeling that Jesus is being a bit unfair to Peter in this reading? Is Jesus really criticising him (and by implication us) for our lack of faith? Are we really to read this passage, and the similar ones about moving mountains and uprooting mulberry trees as meaning that if we have enough faith we can overturn the laws of physics and do all sorts of wonderful magic tricks, because, if that's so, our human condition is pretty hopeless - no-one in this world be they ever-so-holy has ever seemed able to reach that standard.

Or are we perhaps to dig a bit deeper and notice that it was Jesus who invited Peter to step out of the boat. Perhaps what this passage is saying is that if Jesus asks us to do something (or if we think he does) then we should have total confidence of success. But again this flies in the face of human experience. I think I have some idea of what Jesus wants me to do, and like Peter I get excited about it, but quite often I end up with that sinking feeling as, despite all my good intentions it all goes a bit soggy, my efforts fall flat, my desire to help is rejected, the mess of human reality gets in the way. I sometimes feel a bit like one of those cartoon characters who in a chase sequence finds himself running flat out over an abyss, finally spots that his support has gone away, and plunges to disaster.

I'm put in mind of the experienced lady vicar who got exasperated with an enthusiastic member of her flock who kept going on about the Christian life being like being prepared every day to jump out of an aircraft without a parachute. In the end the vicar somewhat brusquely enquired whether her young friend had ever considered that God might have better things to do than scoop up idiots who couldn't make sensible plans.

No, let's put those simplistic explanations of this reading on one side and try again. And the first thing I suggest we should note is that it's probably no accident that this event takes place at sea. Remember the Jews were not a seafaring people – that was down to the people of Tyre and Sidon, the Philistines, the people of the coast. Yes the Jews were ok with little fishing trips on the generally peaceful waters of Galilee, but when you read the Bible you'll generally find the sea represented as an untamed thing, an image of chaos. Remember those waters covering the earth before God brought order to the world at the start of Genesis. So in stepping out of the boat Peter is entering into a world of chaos, of unpredictable disorder – he's making a leap of faith, moving out of his comfort zone as a fisherman in the boat, into unknown territory.

And once again it's worth reminding ourselves what faith is. As Nick and I never seem to tire of saying, in our Christian journey we should bear in mind that faith isn't the opposite of doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. If Peter knew for certain that he could walk on water he wouldn't need faith, he'd just set out as if he were on dry land. Faith isn't about blind belief in particular results despite all the evidence to the contrary; it isn't about swallowing hook, line and sinker certain religious propositions, despite their inherent implausibility. It's not (to quote the Red Queen in Alice in

Wonderland) about believing six impossible things every day before breakfast. Faith isn't about certainty; it's about trust, despite not knowing what's going to happen. Christian faith is about trust in the person of Christ, despite not knowing everything about him and his plans. Faith is about trust, and faith is about allegiance, a willingness to follow. It's an activity of the heart more than the brain.

So let's have another look at our gospel story:

- Peter sees Christ walking on the water – overcoming something of the chaos of this world. Peter doesn't know how Jesus is doing it or even why, but he wants to join in.
- So he invites Jesus' call, and Jesus responds – not with a route map, not with detailed instructions on 'walking on water for beginners', but with one word of encouragement – "come".
- So Peter responds, he takes the risk, he steps out into the unknown, the chaos. He's got no idea what he's doing, how or why, but faith leads him on.
- And so his enthusiasm carries him forward for a few steps, but then reality intervenes, it all starts to go horribly wrong, the chaos gets the better of him – he starts to sink.
- And what does he do? Does he ask for further and better instructions, does he say "I'm a fool for trying", does he beat himself up for being a failure? No, he simply calls on Jesus "Lord, save me".
- And Jesus does. The compassionate hand immediately reaches out and helps Peter back into the boat, and the wind abates.

Faith, then, isn't about knowing the answers. Faith is willingness to risk. It's willingness to step out of the boat, whether you think you'll sink or you'll float, or whether you simply don't know.

So don't wait for certainty. Don't wait for all the answers. Just listen to Jesus, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' Take risks. Have faith.

**Amen**