Jesus comes across the dark waters

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary time (A)

The Gospel story today is graphic. It is easy for us to picture the scene.

The disciples are crossing the great inland lake, the Sea of Galilee. The Lord has chosen to remain alone, going up in the hills for silence and prayer. A lot a significant things have just happened. His cousin, John the Baptist, has just been beheaded by Herod. By an extraordinary miracle he has just fed a large crowd that had been with him for days, feeding thousands from five loaves and two fish. One can only imagine the amazement, excitement this would have generated. Jesus wants to diffuse the situation. The crowds had been sent home. He needed time to rest, to reflect on all that was happening, and to seek his Father’s guidance.

It was evening. Let us imagine the scene. A solitary boat out on this large inland sea. There were no lights or guidance systems to lead them. The sky was overcast. They were in the pitch black. Then the wind arose. A strong wind which whipped up the waves. The waves were breaking over the boat. The disciples were becoming alarmed.

Then a figure appears from the darkness. The already stressed disciples are terrified, St Matthew says. “It is a ghost”, they say.

Then came the voice they knew, and knew well. “Courage, it is I, do not be afraid”. In our own moments of darkness and fear, how much do we need to hear this reassuring voice and hear these encouraging words? I am sure that Lord has often wanted to convey this to us, but we haven’t been attentive to him, consumed as we have been with our own anxieties.

Then something extraordinary happens. I cannot imagine what possessed Peter, but he said, “Lord, if it is you, let me come to you across the waters”. It seems like one of those times when we spontaneously say what wells up within us, realising after we have said it how foolish we have been. However, on Peter’s part it is an act of deep trust in his Lord.

Having said it – and maybe feeling a little silly for having said it – he gets a most surprising reply, in one word, “Come”. Suddenly his bravado is put to the test. No doubt, he suddenly felt a pressure. One can imagine all the disciples in the boat looking at him. What will he do?

To his credit he doesn’t back away by saying something like, “I didn’t really mean that!”

No, he obeys the command. Now picture what happens. Peter putting his hands on the rail of the fishing boat. Lifting one leg over the side, onto the water. Then the other. Then in amazement standing erect. He was walking on water.

Jesus continues to beckon him.

He starts to walk towards Jesus. The safety of the boat is left behind. He is in the middle distance between the boat and Jesus. We are often advised if we are frightened of heights not to look down. Well that’s what Peter now does. He looks down at the black waters below his feet. He is half way between the boat and Jesus. Suddenly fear overwhelms him. He loses faith. He has taken his eyes of Jesus. He has let his physical situation take hold of his emotions.

And he begins to sink. He has no power in himself to walk on water, it is the power of the Lord. Once he disconnects himself from the power of the Lord he sinks.

Now his predicament causes him to turn again and focus on the Lord in front of him. He cries out, “Lord, save me”. One can imagine his hand reaching out desperately towards the Lord as he says this.

And the Lord comes to him with an outstretched hand. He grabs Peter’s hand and pulls him up.

And says, not harshly or critically, but with affection and gentleness, the simple rebuke, “Man of little faith, why did you doubt”.

It is a wonderfully story full of humanity and strong in its testimony to the saving mercy of God revealed in Jesus.

All of us have something of Peter in us. We have had times where we are full of self-confidence and think we can conquer the world. We have made decisions in these moments that were bold but probably foolish. Maybe we have at times felt over-sure of God’s care for us. Not a little presumptuous.

If there have been those occasions of supreme self-assurance, we know that we have had many situations where we have been, like Peter, in a most precarious position. We have perhaps had experiences where we have felt alone and stranded. Our eyes can only see the darkness and the extreme vulnerability of our situation. We have felt waves of fear flowing over us. We have felt that our situation is untenable and we can see no way out.

These may have been times when we have done what Peter has done. We have cried out: “Lord save me”. Our desperation has driven us to our knees. Our hopelessness has led us to prayer.

And this has been a good thing. We have acknowledged our utter need. We have expressed our absolute dependence on the saving mercy of   
God. Indeed, we have learnt a great lesson: I cannot save myself. There is only one who can ultimately save.

This is always an important lesson: we cannot survive without our faith to help us. We learn in these situations what prayer is really about. It is about dependence on God. We know in these moments how much we need to have God in our lives.

It reminds us also of a deep truth: that in the end as our life ebbs from us, as the waters of death surround us, there is one final and great act of faith that each of us have to make. As death approaches we fix our eyes on the Lord who stands before us and we commend ourselves into his hands, with a simple, but deeply personal prayer, “Lord, save me, bring me into your Kingdom”.

This story, graphic as it is, captures so much of what it means to be a believer, of what it means to be a disciple.

In the darkness and fears of our lives, Jesus comes to us emerging from the dark. His words are full of kindness and mercy, “Courage it is I, do not be afraid”.

He is there, always there. Ready to come to us in our need. Praised be his name forever.

Archbishop Julian Porteous

Saturday, 12 August 2017