

Take heart

Genesis 37:17b-28; Matthew 14:22-33

Occasionally I am asked if I have a favourite Bible passage. I like the verse from Job that says, “I know that my Redeemer lives.” I like Deuteronomy telling us to ‘choose life’. The Psalms’ verse, ‘Rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him’ is also important. Jesus telling us that He is ‘the light of the world’ is also powerful for my imagination. But the one passage I come back to often is this one from Matthew’s gospel. Having rested, now walking on the water, coming with help and hope, Jesus says to His terrified, storm-tossed followers, “Take heart, it is I; have no fear.”

There are many times in life, least of all this very moment, when there are times we need to hear those words. Words that lift us up without judging us; words that get alongside us without intimidating us; words that bolster us without bullying. When I hear those words of Jesus I hear firm reassurance, not molly-coddling. The words call out from me the need to respond. I have to take heart; I need to be unafraid. Why, because Jesus is here.

The context of these words sees Jesus turn from the land, where He had fed 5,000 and brought His followers nourishment, then moving on to the hills, where He had gone for some solace and to recharge His batteries and to pray, and now to the sea. He had sent His disciples on ahead of Him to cross the Lake. But one of those sudden, unexpected, terrifying storms blew up, whipping the often quiet lake into a mountainous sea, and the disciples were terrified. From where would help come?

- Jesus, throughout His ministry, made time to be on His own. What do you think He did? What do you do with your ‘alone time’?

Jesus was exhausted. Here He is, halfway through His work in Galilee – teaching, healing, giving those who followed and those who listened food for thought, leading by His own example. Challenging their way of thinking and being, urging the people He met, whoever they were, to look at their world with the same eyes but in a different way. He wanted the people of His day to reframe how they looked at their world, and to rethink what they thought about it, and maybe even

to engage with it in a different way because God had moved on, and God called the people to move on too.

But it was exhausting. So Jesus made time to be on His own. He needed time to think, and wonder, and re-engage with His heavenly Father. Some might say He needed the time to get back to the basics of His ministry. Why am I doing these things? What do I hope the outcomes will be? How should I move on? Where does God want me to journey next?

These last months may very well have given each one of us similar opportunity. Still going about our everyday duties and responsibilities, but the frame through which we look the world has changed, maybe for good. What do we do next? When? Why? How? Though people have been tired, with doing too much, with doing very little, to take these moments and to engage with God is almost certainly going to help.

I spoke to someone last week about how they'd found being back in the Church after all these months. What they found was, away from home, regardless of anything I said, or the music played, simply sitting in the still and the calm of this wide, open space gave them a different way to look at problems and challenges, hopes and fears. And then the music and words and order of the service kicked in and, somehow, it was as if God had reached out to touch and to hold. I found that very moving and very profound to hear. Equally conducting a funeral last Friday, listening to the story of a faithful life, well-lived. A different shape of service, yet in the stillness of this place, alone yet together, God wove through music and words to help those present be still, and think, and wonder, and hope, and pray. That's what Jesus did in His 'alone' time. Might we?

- What are the storms of life you have experienced, and does it make a difference to hear Jesus say, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear."?

Moving on from His 'alone' time – Jesus moves on to the water, to find His friends, and walks into a storm. Storms in the Bible signify chaos, and doubt, and fear, and pain. Storms disrupt the norm and bully people away from faith. Into such a storm Jesus walked. His disciples thought they'd been forgotten and abandoned, and their fate sealed. Into the storm walks Jesus. "Take heart, it is I, have no fear." Be encouraged, you are not alone, have trust, have hope. Storms on the Sea of Galilee, that long funnel of water with hills on either side, can whip up out of nowhere. Storms

in our lives, with our routines and our familiarities can also whip up out of nowhere. Into these storms, great and small, Jesus, the giver of freedom, the One Who has come to save, the victor over chaos, walks towards us. In the image of this story – I see Jesus reaching out. In the midst of the storm, good news comes. Whatever frustrates us, or frightens us, or weighs us down, or threatens to overwhelm us, Jesus walks towards us, reaching out. “Take heart, it is I, have no fear.”

I spent time with a dying man last week, sad, but a privilege. He knew his situation was terminal, and had come home to die, surrounded by loved ones and familiar things. “Is there anything you want to tell me? Are you afraid?” I asked. “No, I’m not sure what to say, it’s lovely to be peaceful.” A non-believer might have said this was sinking into death. I see now it was soaring into life. Not with unwavering certainty, but with hopeful recognition.

When we ‘hear’ the voice of Jesus, might it not also be for us, amidst the storm of life, that the words are as powerful, simple and direct as they are to all storm-tossed disciples: “Take heart, it is I. Have no fear.”

- When Peter stepped over the side of the boat, was he being brave, or foolhardy, or faithful, or doubtful?

Having heard the words of encouragement, and seeing Jesus’ arms stretching out, do we stay in the storm-tossed boat with the fearful ones, or do we step out? Peter, rash, foolhardy, storming ahead, not thinking things through Peter, steps out. I don’t think he quite believed he should, but his doubts weren’t enough to hold him back. He trusted, almost enough, and stepped into the unknown.

When we were thinking about reopening the Church, and wading through the lengthy regulations, all there to protect us but my God are they mind-numbingly tedious, someone in the discussion said, “It’s time to be brave.”

Peter recognised Jesus in the storm and wanted to accompany Him. Jesus says, “Take heart, have no fear. It is I”, and then, “Come”. Then Peter steps out of his comfort zone. He takes his eyes off Jesus and focusses on the storm, and begins to sink, but Jesus reaches out, and tells Peter not to doubt but believe.

I've often wondered about the others in the boat. Spectators of a miracle. Rooted to their storm-tossed boat. How I wished they'd all stepped over the side towards Jesus, and danced around Him in faith amongst the waves.

But Peter did, doubtful, but faithful; fearful but hopeful. But Jesus reached out, and Jesus saved. In this risk averse time, what are the little steps over the side we might take in our lives? Peter wasn't called to dance around Jesus amongst the stormy waves, but simply, even sinking a little, walk towards the Lord. I know for some coming here to Church is such a step. "Take heart, have no fear. It is I". I know for some, going back to a shop is such a step. "Take heart, have no fear. It is I". I know for some, meeting up for a coffee, or going to stay with family they've not seen for months, or sorting out a return to work, or picking up the pieces after the blast in Beirut, and moving from death to life is such a step. "Take heart, have no fear. It is I", Jesus said. And then He says, 'Come.'

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen