

Sermon

Sunday 9 August 2020

Lesson

St Matthew 14: 22 – 33

At night in darkness, the disciples began their journey by boat across the Sea of Galilee. In the rich, poetic language of the King James Version, we are told that ‘the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary’. ‘Contrary’, the Galilean Sea or Lake Tiberius, was renowned for the suddenness of storms, for the speed with which violent winds would stir up and in no time at all the swell of the waters would take hold of any ship, driving it helplessly off course. Unable to see the moon, stars or the shore, the disciples were powerless and lost.

It was during the fourth watch, around 3 o’clock in the morning, night’s darkest moments, Jesus came to them walking on the sea. In fear, believing Him to be a ghost, they cried out. Jesus said, ‘Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid’. Immediately, Peter asked, ‘Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water’. Jesus said, ‘Come’. In faith, Peter stepped out of the boat and, looking at Jesus, walked across the turbulent waves. Suddenly, when he saw the waves, he became fearful, began to sink and called out, ‘Lord, save me’. Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him.

Though familiar, the story of Jesus and Peter walking on the water is incredibly dramatic and memorable. The Scottish mystic, the late George Matheson of Innellan, saw himself step out of the boat and walk upon the water. In a moment of imaginative meditation, Matheson felt Jesus' loneliness on the water and left the boat to be with Him. It is easy to feel breathless if we allow ourselves to enter the story, become caught up in the spectacle, and sense the nearness of Jesus. Scripture is an art form: it is theological theatre played out to change our lives.

Jesus told His disciples, 'It is I'. Centuries earlier, at the bush burning on Mount Horeb, Moses asked of God, 'What is Your name?' God replied, 'I AM'. Standing barefoot on holy ground, Moses felt the Numinous, the perfect nearness of God: I AM. In English, as Jesus approached the boat, He said to the disciples, 'It is I'; in Greek, this is 'I AM'. In the Jewish tradition, I AM is understood to mean 'I am with you'.

In Psalm 69, we hear the psalmist call out in distress:

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come
into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary
with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with
waiting for my God.'

The story of Jesus walking on water – and the miracle of Peter walking on water – is surely about encountering the Divine, our Eternal Lover, in the very midst of this life, in our trials and sufferings, in our darkest, weakest, most powerless moments. In the Gospels, the sea may mean more than an expanse of water but a symbol of the abyss, of utter emptiness and desolation.

Though she worked tirelessly among some of the world's poorest peoples, St Mother Teresa of Calcutta struggled in her faith. Day after day, seeing with her own eyes the terrible suffering of others, the cruelties of disease and poverty including that of children, perhaps she became exhausted, drained emotionally and spiritually. Mother Teresa prayed:

Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me?
The child of your love – and now become as the most
hated one – the one You have thrown away as unwanted –
unloved. I call, I cling, I want – and there is no One
to answer, no one on whom I can cling. The darkness is so
dark, and I am alone. Unwanted, forsaken. The loneliness
of the heart that wants love is unbearable. Where is my faith?
Even deep down, there is nothing but emptiness and darkness.

Later, St Teresa spoke of the untold darkness, the loneliness, and the deep pain in her heart. She said, 'The place of God in my soul is blank. There is no God in me'.

A member of the Church, living a life of service, faith and prayer, does not mean that we will be exempt from struggles, hardships and suffering. Physical pain, anxieties and the burdens of love may drain us immeasurably; on more than one occasion in our lives, we may feel ourselves to be sinking. In the face of personal anguish, brokenness or loss, there is no place for trite, shallow assurances that Jesus will suddenly, miraculously, as if by magic, make all things immediately well. In the presence of a heart that truly aches, tender, loving silence is a gospel response. The sense of God's Presence, of the strong hand of Jesus, is itself spiritual medicine for the soul, sustenance in suffering.

Twice in chapter 14 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus sought the solitude and seclusion of the desert place: in stillness, He again became aware of God within Him. We are to read the story of the storm, inwardly digest it, and, like Matheson, see and feel the nearness of Jesus, stretch out our hand that He may take it.

Amen.