

Deep calls to deep (Matthew 14.22-33)

Neil Millar

During my childhood and teenage years, I spent a lot of time ‘messing around in boats’, to quote Ratty’s words to his friend Mole in Kenneth Grahame’s wonderful book *The Wind in the Willows*. I loved sailing and spent most summer weekends racing dinghys somewhere around Sydney – Pittwater, the Harbour, Botany Bay and occasionally further afield – Jindabyne and Lake Burley Griffin. Later, I got into ocean racing, and in 1975, at the tender age of 17, I completed my first Sydney to Hobart Yacht race. One lesson I learnt in all of this was that if you spend time on the water, sooner or later, you’ll be caught in a storm. I’ve got some dramatic experiences I could share, but none of them match what we’ve just heard. I’ve been *in* the water plenty of times. Walking on it?? What are we to make of what happens here?

Let’s begin by getting a sense of the context. In the previous chapter, we had parables, including the Parable of the Sower. In this chapter, Matthew offers stories which seem to illustrate responses to the word of God as described in that parable. The first two stories, in which Jesus and John are rejected, exemplify seed falling on a hard path – snatched away by birds, taking no root. The next pair of stories, including this one, display a mixed response – belief and unbelief – like the seed that fell in thorny and shallow soils, sprouting initially but then overwhelmed and withering. In the fifth story, ‘outsiders’ at Gennesaret receive and trust Jesus wholeheartedly – like the seed that fell in good soil and bore fruit. So, this storm story comes in the middle – a story of faith and doubt.

To set the scene, the disciples have just witnessed the miracle of the feeding of the 5000. With seemingly meagre rations, Jesus has fed a huge multitude. The disciples didn’t believe it could be done, but Jesus is teaching them that, where trust is exercised, God can do much with little.

Immediately after this common meal, this ‘communion’, Jesus dismisses the crowd to their homes and sends his disciples across the lake. He himself goes up a mountain to pray. As night falls, the disciples are ‘far from land’ battling strong wind and waves. Apparently, Galilee is prone to such conditions – storms that whip up quickly and violently. ‘*And early in the morning*’, it says, ‘*he (Jesus) came walking toward them on the sea*’ (25). Actually, the Greek is more specific about the time, it was, ‘*during the fourth guard (watch)*’ that he came. When I was ocean racing, we called this watch the ‘death watch’. It’s the last watch of the night, it goes from 3-6am, it’s dark, cold and lonely. You need to be especially careful on this watch because you’re tired and can make mistakes; your eyes and mind play tricks on you; many a sailor has been lost overboard on this watch. I imagine the disciples were struggling at this point so I’m not surprised they were freaked out by what they saw. They’re thinking ‘ghost’, and they cry out in fear (26). I get it!!

But immediately, Jesus speaks, ‘*Courage!*’, he says (literally) ‘*I am! Don’t be afraid!*’ Structurally, this sentence occurs at the very centre of this story, and the Greek words *egō eimi* (*I am*) are packed with theological meaning. When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush and revealed the divine name (Yahweh), it was translated *egō eimi* in Greek, I am! These words are lost in our translation but they’re crucial to the story and what it reveals about Jesus. (A similar thing happens in John’s gospel, with the 7 ‘I am’ statements – *I am the bread of life, the light of the world, good shepherd, the door, the resurrection*). This is no ordinary, ‘hi guys, it’s me, don’t worry,’; Jesus is making a divine claim – ‘the divine Lord addressing his storm-tossed church’, Bruner writes (2004.67). If *I am* is coming to us, then we need not fear the storm. But it’s one thing to say that, and quite another to believe it when the wind is howling and the waves are crashing over the bow. Which brings us to Peter’s cameo appearance!

Good old Peter, he has a few of these in the gospels! ‘*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*’ I’ve got to say, I’ve wondered about these words. What possessed Peter to say what he does? Was it a sign of disbelief or cynicism, was he ‘testing’ Jesus’ claim to divinity – ‘Yeah, right!! If it is you, and you are who you say you are, command me to come and join you’. Or was it a sign of something more, something deeper – a desire to be called up, really to do something with and for God? I note that it’s Peter’s initiative here; if he hadn’t said it, would Jesus have commanded him? I don’t know. I’m curious...

Whatever the reason he does say it; and Jesus responds – ‘Come’. Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking. But then, he feels that wind on his face, and remembers what he’s doing, and it freaks him out and he begins to drown. Notice that he doesn’t start sinking and then get scared; he gets scared and then flounders. His fear itself is undermining – fear of his circumstances. ‘*Lord, heeelp!*’ he cries, (my translation) and immediately Jesus stretches out his hand. ‘*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*’ he says. We all know exactly why, but Jesus grabs hold of Peter’s hand, they get into the boat; (immediately!) the wind dies down, and they all worship him, saying ‘*Truly you are the son of God.*’ So, what to make of it?

I guess we could spend some time debating whether this gravity-defying event actually happened. I don’t have much energy for that, and it misses the point. Clearly this story was important for Matthew and his community – the real truth consists in its theological meaning and the message it communicates for the church. I’ve already noted what it says about Jesus. This is central to the story, and our faith. But what of this second piece to do with Peter’s response? What is this suggesting?

My first impulse is to quote that saying: *Be careful what you ask for, you might just get it.* Did Peter mean what he said? Was he really prepared to

get out of that boat in the dark of night, miles from land to attempt the impossible? Well, what seems striking to me is that though he does take initiative, he also knows he needs more of a lead. He senses the direction in which God lies, but without a real draw it's too hard to leave the relative safety of the boat: *'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.'* And Jesus responds to that kind of request. Peter isn't asking for something easy or safe – *'Lord, preserve me'*. He's asking to go where Jesus is, with all the risk that entails. I think this is a word, and invitation to the church (which is built on Peter). Are we willing to do this? To take the risk of asking as Peter does? *Jesus, tell us what you'd have us do, call us out, and we'll have a go.*

Well, 'no' we might be saying, because we know that we'll get scared and start sinking (just like Peter did). *Don't start what you can't finish*, we could add, to quote another piece of 'wisdom'; *don't bite off more than you can chew*. We'll it's true. Our faith does falter when things get hard. And, it is possible to take reckless steps, supposedly 'in faith', that are just plain stupid. That's why it's so important to receive our call, our direction from God, and not just cook up some 'bold' plan. But, having heard a command, there is another principle that's important in the gospels, and that is: *If you don't embark, if you don't step out in faithful obedience, nothing happens.*

In the story immediately before this, Jesus commanded his disciples to feed a hungry crowd with five loaves and two fish. It was a daunting prospect; impossible in their minds. But *something happened* when Jesus prayed and they started passing out that bread, when they stepped into it. It was the same with those ten lepers who sought healing from Jesus (Lk 17.11-19). *Go and show yourselves to the priests*, Jesus commanded. And, *as they went*, they were healed. They didn't go because they were ready, or because

they were already healed. They went because he told them to go, and as they went, they were healed.

It's when disciples, when the church steps out in obedience to Jesus's command that help comes. It's clearly not all easy – there are prevailing winds against us and they can fill us with fear. We can falter, feel freaked out and the more we focus on those threatening conditions, the more we flounder – the more tempted we are just to play safe.

There's a sense in which this story seems far removed from our place and time – disciples in a boat, in the dark, in a storm, on Lake Galilee centuries away. In another sense though, it's quite close, for all over this country, and the world, in fact, there are little groups of disciples in boats (called churches) feeling similarly pressed and afraid, far from shore and threatened by strong wind and waves. Struggling for survival as they slowly sink. What we in the boat often fail to understand, Hauerwas writes (2006.141), is that we're 'meant to be far from the shore and that to be threatened by a storm is not unusual'. It comes with obeying the call of Jesus. And, sometimes it gets even wilder than that, for some will dare to ask and then 'be commanded to leave even the safety of the boat' – to 'walk on water'. Is that you? Me? Is it us? It's something to pray about, and I hope we will. Amen.