

## Sermon 2023 08 13 Text

The Gospel story of Jesus coming to the disciples walking on the water is a tale so familiar to us that we probably now just read it and pass on.

Jesus walks on the water and helps Peter walk on the water even after a bad start.

It has become a fixed image and gives us a criteria by which we might judge the depth of a person's faith.

But that criteria is never used except in a derogatory or humorous context.

I'm sure you all know the really old joke about the three clergy who go fishing.

A Catholic priest, an Anglican priest and a Uniting Church Minister go fishing on a lake.

They have just finished rowing to their fishing spot when the Anglican priest realises he has forgotten his fishing rod. So he gets out of the boat, walks across the water gets his rod and walks back to the boat. The Uniting Church Minister stares in amazement.

About half an hour later the Catholic priest says "I need to go to the toilet." He, too, gets out of the boat, walks across the water, finds the nearest toilet, walks back across the water and gets into the boat. Again, the Uniting Church Minister stares in amazement and feels he has something to prove.

So when, half an hour later they realise they have left their lunch in the car he immediately volunteers to go and collect it.

He stands up, puts his feet on the water, and splash, he goes straight down under the water.

The Catholic priest, and the Anglican priest look over the edge of the boat and the Catholic priest says, "Do you think we should show him where the rocks are?"

To which the Anglican priest replies, "What rocks?"

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But a problem exists. We are so entranced by Jesus walking on the water that we overlook a second, and dare I suggest, deeper truth in the Gospel.

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The "lake" that the disciples are crossing is probably the sea of Galilee which at its longest is 21 km, at its widest is 11 km and covers a total area of about 166 square kms. At its deepest it is almost half a km.

It is in a low lying position in a rift valley, surrounded by hills and because of this is prone to sudden, violent storms.

The disciples set off in a fishing boat to cross this body of water in a boat about the size of the wooden surf life-saving boat.

A storm comes and the disciples are afraid.

Now we need to remember that is not just heavy rain. There are strong winds and potentially 5, 10 and 15 metre waves.

But Jesus comes to them in the calm of the morning after they have survived the horrors of the night.

In a similar version of the parable Jesus is asleep in the boat as the storm rages around them, and they need to wake him to calm the sea and feel safe again.

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For me, this in a more significant dimension to the story. Walking on water is a great image, but has no value greater than an image.

The essence of this story is about the companionship of Jesus.

How often are we thrown about by the swirling waters of life that threaten to destroy us? How often do we feel we are facing the storms of life alone? How often do we feel isolated by the storm? How often do we feel that Christ is there in the easy times, but much harder to access in the midst of the storm?

I want to suggest to you that this combined story – or perhaps a story broken in two provides that assurance that we do not face the storms of life alone.

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We all face difficult times. A loved one is extremely ill, or we ourselves are very unwell. A member of our family or we ourselves are in a deep emotional crisis – there seems no way forward and no way back and we are without solution to a storm that rages through our bodies, our minds and our spirits.

And because we are so weighed down in crisis, we are unable to see any solution, let alone work towards that solution.

We withdraw from communities and friendships; we isolate ourselves in shame. And we work constantly in that downward circle because we are so alone and so afraid.

And we fear a quality of death. Perhaps the death of our body; perhaps the death of our minds or our capacity to feel; perhaps the death of our relationships – the ability to care for others and to allow them to care for us.

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And here we find the essence of this Gospel message. Our isolation is imagined. Christ has the power to defy the laws of nature. He may walk on water; he may stop the storm.

And why does he have these gifts? He has these capacities that defy the laws of nature so that we may never be alone; never face a crisis without his companionship and love; never ever walk into the darkness alone or without the light of his companionship.

We condemn ourselves to an isolated struggle, by failing to recognise that the creating love of God, that the sacrificing love of Jesus and that companioning and guiding love of the Holy Spirit controls not just the spiritual universe, but the physical and emotional universes as well.

If we accept that truth, we will know two things.

We will know that God's love for us is absolute and unconditional; and

We will know that there is no state in the physical, emotional and spiritual worlds that contains a barrier which prevents the fulness of God embracing us in our struggles, holding us in our fears and carrying us to safety.

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