

Sunday Morning Worship 9 August 2020

From the United Reformed Churches at Morpeth,
Widdrington and Gt Bavington.

Opening Words

"Give praise to the Lord, call on his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.
Sing of him, sing his praises;
tell of all his wonderful acts." Psalm 105:1-2

Hymn: Dear Lord and Father of Mankind

forgive our foolish ways;
re clothe us in our rightful mind,
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard
beside the Syrian sea
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word
rise up and follow thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee,
O calm of hills above,
where Jesus knelt to share with thee
the silence of eternity,
interpreted by love!

With that deep hush subduing all
our words and works that drown
the tender whisper of thy call,
as noiseless let thy blessing fall
as fell thy manna down.

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!

J.G. Whittier

Prayer

Father of us all, forgive our foolish ways.

As we reflect on the things we have said and done in
this past week,
we bring to mind those occasions when we have been
foolish.

Those times when we have believed that our ways are
better than yours.

Those times when we have believed our actions do not
impact others.

Those times when we have believed that our needs are
more important than others.

Silence

We ask your forgiveness, and that you may re-clothe us
in our rightful mind.

As we come to hear your Word today, we take a
moment to still our hearts and our minds,
so that you may drop your dew of quietness over our
lives
and bring peace to the turbulent waters on which we
have travelled.

May we in this moment, hear you speaking clearly to us
above the storm,
so that we may be ready to step out in faith, and to take
your Word with us,
to the place that we will go.

Silence

Lord, speak to us through the earthquake, wind and
fire, your voice of calm in our lives.

AMEN

Reading: Matthew 14:22-33

Sermon

During the lockdown we have been holding some online
Bible Studies as we have been going through the book
of The Acts of the Apostles and exploring how the early
church started to grow. Some of the things we have
been discussing have been how the Apostles such as
Paul and Peter just told the simple truth about Jesus
and who he was and then left it to the Holy Spirit to do
the work. In their evangelism there was little coercion
or persuasion or incentives given, just the gospel
message and a choice for those who heard to make. In
the session on Tuesday we were with the Apostle Paul
in Syria as he encouraged the new Christians with the
message "We must go through many hardships to enter
the kingdom of God." There is an honesty about the
Christian life, and very little sugar coating.

Many believe that the Christian life is all about escaping
the problems of this world. That all the problems of life
will fall away and troubles will be a thing of the past.
But since those early days of the Apostles going out on
mission, this is not what the Christian journey is about –
and we start to understand something of that as we
explore this reading from Matthews gospel today.

You know they say you can tell a lot about a person by the way they handle these three things : a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas Tree lights - how do you fare? Do these things bring out the best in you as a person? Or do they unleash the monster within? As some stage in our lives we all have to deal with these things – but just imagine travelling home on a rainy day, having lost your luggage at the airport and the first thing you have to do when you get home is to untangle a set of Christmas tree lights. What a bummer of a day that would be?

Some days the world just comes crashing in upon you, pour more and more troubles your way, until you are in danger of being overwhelmed. During lockdown, I like many have struggled with being overwhelmed at times. Amidst this crisis, there have been a series of small, rather insignificant troubles, that I have had to deal with, and though each on its own may seem minor, the accumulative effect has at times seemed overwhelming.

We all face these times, and being a Christian does not give us some sort of supernatural protection from these things. The passage about Peter in the storm reminds us that we all face times of crisis – and how we react in those circumstances tells a lot more about ourselves than when everything is going well.

Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. amidst the storms of racial discrimination in America in the 1950's said these words of encouragement to those who were being overwhelmed and in danger of giving in: "The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy"

Being a Christian does not prevent bad things happening to us. We all have bad times and good times. St Ignatius calls these times of consolation and desolation. And Ignatian spirituality focussed on this as part of the natural cycle of our lives, and recognising that in both times of desolation and consolation we need to look out for the presence of God with us.

According to Ignatius "Desolation is one of the regular things that happens when we pray, We can even expect it from time to time. Our spiritual life goes in waves: with ups and downs. A down is not necessarily a sign that something is wrong. It may on the contrary be a sign of progress, in that it means we have progressed beyond our last pleasant plateau of consolation."

"Our spiritual life goes in waves: with ups and downs"- it seems as if Ignatius was speaking just about this passage from Matthew today. The disciples on that boat were facing the waves - spiritual waves and physical waves. When we often think of this story we picture the boat sitting on the still serene midnight

waters, and Jesus gently walking across the water. What Matthew describes is anything but. The boat was being buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. A storm is brewing and the boat is being rocked.

And then the disciples see something in the distance, but they don't know what it is, but the situation causes them to be terrified. And though they are waiting and looking out for Jesus to arrive, when he comes they don't recognise him. He seems like a ghost.

What we learn is that when we look for God's presence with us in the bad times, we quite often look for God in the mighty and the spectacular. Quite often we think God will come charging to the rescue, and we are so intent on looking for God in this way, that sometimes we miss the signs of God's presence in the simple and unnoticed ways in which he works things for our good.

Max Lucado says: "When the disciples saw Jesus in the middle of their stormy night, they called him a ghost. A phantom. A hallucination. To them, the glow was anything but God. "When Jesus comes" the disciples in the boat may have thought "he'll split the sky. The sea will be calm. The clouds will disperse." And we who struggle with our faith today think "When God comes all pain will flee. Life will be tranquil. No questions will remain."

And because we look for the bonfire, we miss the candle. Because we listen for the shout, we miss the whisper.

I have just passed my 10 year anniversary of my ordination, and at my ordination service this passage from Matthew was one of my chosen readings – it is one of my favourites. It's a passage that reminds me that I too need to step out in faith, and that God does not promise we will not fail or be buffeted and tossed by the waves, but that he will always be there to hold out a hand when the waves threaten to overcome us. But the passage also reminds me that we are called as Christians to embark on mission just as the apostles did in that book of Acts. That we are to venture into the unknown in order to bring God's love and Good News to others.

When Matthew starts the story he says "Immediately, Jesus **made** the disciples get into the boat and to go on ahead of him to the other side." And then Matthew tells us that he **dismisses** the crowds. There are five thousand people hanging on every word of Jesus, they have just received a free lunch courtesy of a little boys picnic, they are claiming Jesus as their King. When Matthew tells the story, he says that Jesus just dismisses the crowd. This passage opens by making quite clear that this is about the authority of Jesus, not

just over the turbulent waters, but also over the disciples and the people.

And Jesus tells the disciples to go to the "other side". Jesus has been teaching the 5000, the Jewish men women and children about the gospel and the kingdom, and now Jesus says to go to the other side. Go to those who are the Gentiles. For us they represent the unchurched, the minorities, those people who do not recognise Jesus authority and teaching. We can think of many sections of our society who are regarded as those being on the other side. And Jesus has the authority, to compel, even force us to go to them. To go on ahead of him to the other side.

When Matthew tells this story, he is writing to the early Jewish Christians, and he is making very clear that Jesus has the authority to tell them to go to the Gentiles with the gospel. Just as we have been exploring in that Bible Study of the early church spreading further afield and taking the gospel message to the Gentiles then, the call of Jesus remains on our lives today, to go the unknown and spread the gospel message.

Now our Anglican friends will know better than we might, that the central area of the church where we normally sit is called the nave. From the latin word navis, referring to a boat or ship. It is the same word we get the word Navy from. Because the church is a boat, were those who are saved may find safety against the stormy waters of sin and judgement.

But the boat that we are in, was not intended to stay tied up in the dock. But to set sail across the waters to the other side. When Matthew explains this to the early Christians, he tells them that as the boat moves away from the safety and shelter of the Jewish shore, it became buffeted by the wind and waves. In Mark the boat is even tormented by the waves.

Matthew knew that for these early Christians, taking their message to the other side, was not going to be plain sailing. They were going to have to face stormy waters - temptations, trials and suffering because of it. This passage is for them an encouragement that what they are doing is what Jesus has commanded them to do, and that Jesus is still in control and will not let them sink.

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I started by telling you about Pauls encouragement to the early Church that "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." As Christians today we take it for granted that we can believe and talk freely about our faith, but we are reminded that in many areas of the world today, like in the time Matthew is writing for the early church, talking about

the Christian message was dangerous, and his listeners would know all too well what he meant when he says the boat was tormented by the wind and waves. The Book of Acts is littered with accounts of how the apostles were persecuted for sharing their message with those they encountered - it was part and parcel of being a Christian.

So in our passage today, when this boat on which the disciples have set sail, is tormented by the waves and storm, Jesus walks towards the boat, unaffected by the storm growing around them.

And he calls Peter to get out of the boat. The water is wet, it is dark and dangerous. But Jesus is not in the boat. Jesus calls Peter to walk out onto the water where Jesus is. Jesus calls us personally, to step out in faith in our lives, to not just seek the safety and refuge of the church, but to step out into the water. We are not to be what Jon Ortberg calls 'pew potatoes' or 'boat potatoes'. We cannot just be content to sit in church and believe that is all our Lord requires of us. Jesus calls us to step out of the boat and walk on the water with him.

Jesus has just performed a really great miracle. It was fantastic. He has fed 5000 people out of nothing. Just think what kind of King he would be. No wonder everyone claimed him as their King at that moment. The gathered disciples had done all they could to make the people understand what Jesus was about, and what he could do for them. It was the most spectacular piece of outreach. But Jesus dismisses the crowds, and instead we are told how Jesus comes walking on the water to Peter, and tells him to come to him.

Jesus did not want to wow people with his miracles, so that they would follow him because he was the best on offer, because he was the most competitive, he could provide the answer to a national economic crisis. He dismisses the crowds, and we are told this story by Matthew of Jesus coming on the water to Peter, and calling him by name to step out and join him on the water. To leave the safety and security of his boat, and venture out in the personal mission to those on the other side.

Nancy Gibbs says "For those who are faithful, no miracle is necessary. For those who doubt, no miracle is sufficient."

Jesus had done the spectacular, the miraculous, in feeding the 5000, but that wasn't going to be sufficient to bring any to faith, to bring any closer to God. God is essentially personal, and it would take a personal encounter to fulfil the mission of spreading the gospel. I love this passage from Matthew because I am challenged to step out of the church, to take the risk of

stepping out in faith, into the turbulent waters of our culture and community, and to engage with people on an individual personal level.

We can do the big, spectacular things in church, but God is essentially personal. And we all are called, to step out of the safety of the church, and to engage with people on a personal basis in order to bring the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

Hymn: Will your anchor hold in the storms of life.

When the clouds unfold their wings of strife?
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,
Will your anchor drift or firm remain?

*We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love.*

Will your anchor hold in the straits of fear,
When the breakers roar and the reef is near?
While the surges rave, and the wild winds blow,
shall the angry waves your boat o'erflow?
We have an anchor.....

Will your anchor hold in the floods of death,
When the waters cold chill our latest breath?
On the rising tide you can never fail,
while your anchor holds you will still prevail.
We have an anchor.....

Will your eyes behold through the morning light
the city of gold and the harbour bright?
Will you anchor safe by the heavenly shore
when life's storms are past for evermore?
We have an anchor.....

Priscilla J. Owens (altd.)

Prayers of Intercession

If you are able to make a paper boat, you will need this during the prayers.

Let us pray:

O God,
When the storms of life threaten to overwhelm it is natural for us to fear.
You call us to be courageous in mission, but we often find our faith lacking.
When we are called to take risks, we often look for the easy way out.
When we see injustice, we often keep silent.

But you God, are a God of compassion and justice, and we can trust you.
Have mercy on us. Forgive us our sin. Lead us and call us onwards.

O God,
Give us the courage we need to take risks in your name, to do that which others think is impossible, to do that which we think is impossible.
Help us to step out of the boat, onto the rising waves, and go forward to the place where you wait to meet us, knowing that if we fall, you will be there to catch us.

Place your boat down, on water if possible.

We remember before you today those who face storms in their lives.

We remember before you the oppressed and persecuted, and those for whom expressing their faith brings suffering and hardship.

We remember before you the poor and the needy, and those for whom the daily task of finding food and shelter is a challenge.

We remember those who are discriminated against because of the colour of their skin, and for those communities where law and order, morality and respect, have broken down.

And lastly, as a community and family of faith, we remember before you those we name before you this morning:

those who are bereaved,
those who are sick,
those with chronic illness,
and those who are entering hospital.

In this moment we name before you those on our hearts at this time..... -

We ask you to hear all our prayers, O God, in the name of the one who taught us to pray to you as one family, saying...

OUR FATHER..

Hymn: 58 Eternal Father Strong to Save

whose arm doth bind the restless wave,
who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
its own appointed limits keep:
O hear us when we cry to thee
for those in peril on the sea.

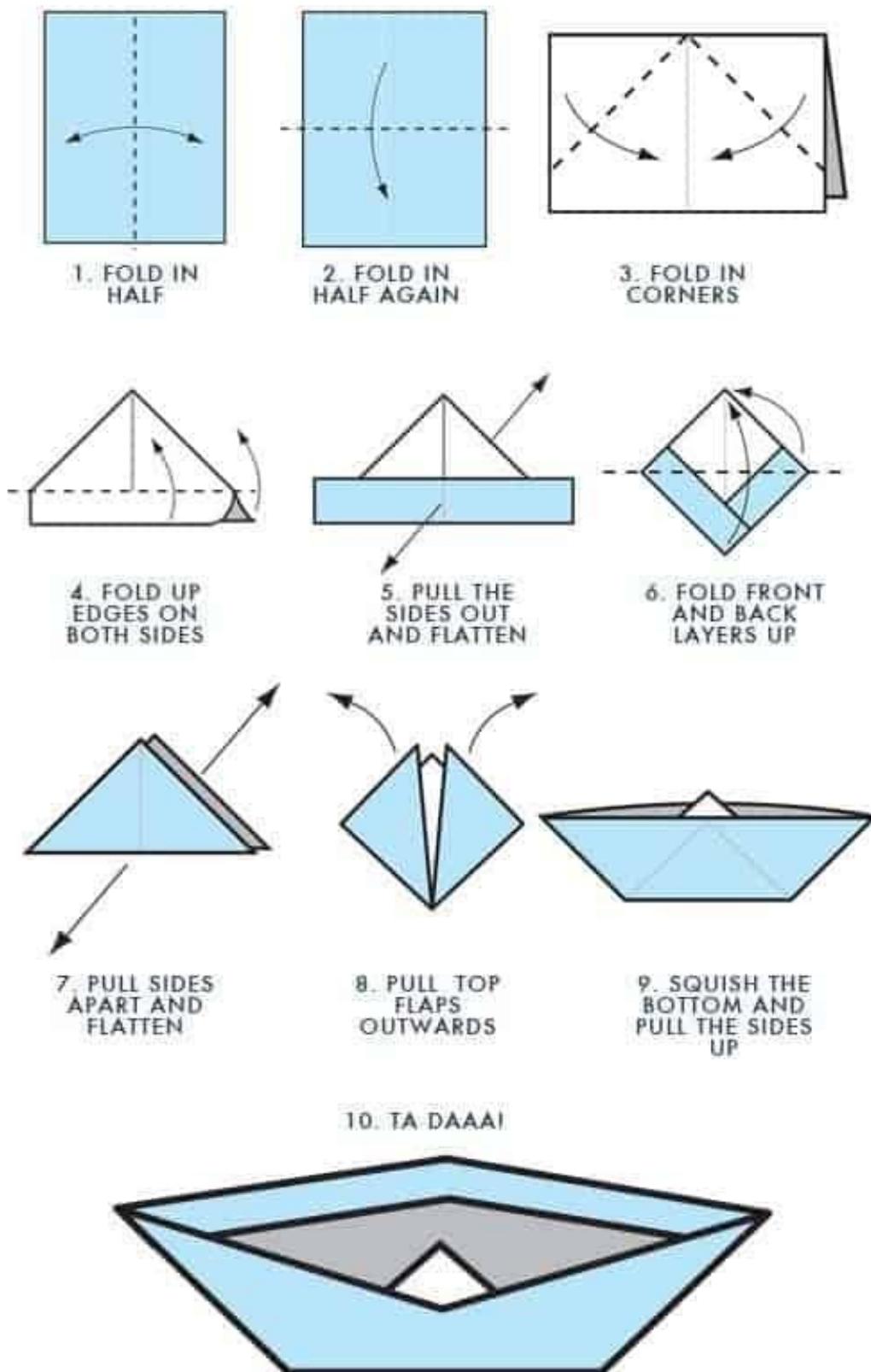
O Saviour, whose almighty Word
the winds and waves submissive heard,
who walkedst on the foaming deep,
and calm amid its rage didst sleep;
O hear us when we cry to thee
for those in peril on the sea.

O Holy Spirit, who didst sweep
across the dark and formless deep
to bid its angry tumult cease,
and give, for wild confusion, peace:
O hear us when we cry to thee
for those in peril on the sea.

through wreck and tempest, grief and loss,
renew the triumph of the Cross:
and ever let there rise to thee
glad hymns of praise from land and sea.

William Whiting (altd)

Blessing



O Trinity of I
sustain us all in danger's hour;