

Pentecost 11/Proper 19, Year A

1 Kings 19:9-18, Romans 10:5-15, Matthew 14:22-33

Well, there I was, out in a boat in the middle of Lake Galilee and it was blowing up a storm something terrible. I wasn't on my own of course; it needed all of us to row against that wind if we were to have any hope of getting to the other side. And it wasn't our choice either. Jesus made us go, compelled us in fact, while he himself stayed behind.

No, my choice would have been to go home and put my feet up with a glass of wine. It had been such an extraordinary, emotional and exhausting day.

It started off calmly enough, if rather sadly, because Jesus had learnt that his cousin John, the Baptist, had been horrifically murdered on the orders of King Herod. So naturally we all wanted to go somewhere quiet to grieve. We knew John too. Jesus directed us to take one of the boats to a quiet spot on the shore of the lake. But even before we arrived thousands of people – and I do mean thousands, we counted them – had got there first. So what did Jesus do? Turn around and go somewhere else? No way!

That isn't his style. No, he got out of the boat, joined the crowd and healed those who were sick.

And that's where our exhausting day started. Getting the sick people in place so that Jesus could minister to them, directing others. It went on for hours. It must have been even more exhausting for Jesus.

Which is why it was such a surprise when it got late and we suggested to him that he send the people home, he decided instead to feed them all – over 5000 people – with just five loaves and two fish. Which made our day all the more tiring as we were tasked with the distribution of the food and the collection of all the left-overs afterwards, no mean task, I tell you. There was a lot of food!

Then it was home-time but not for us, even though it was getting dark. As I said, Jesus insisted that we take the boat to the other side of the lake, some five or six miles away. By this time it was also getting cold and the wind was coming up, as it so often does when the temperature drops. Jesus must have seen, must have felt the wind, must have known how monstrous the waves could be, but still he insisted. And we always tried to do what Jesus said.

So did Jesus go home and put his feet up? Not at all. He went up the mountain to pray.

Out on the lake the storm was really kicking in. So much wind and spray it was hard to see where we were going, let alone make any headway. By the time it had gone three in the morning we were still not much more than halfway across the lake. And we were scared, I'll admit. The rabbis taught that raging waters were a sign of chaos and disorder, even of God's judgement, like in the story of Jonah. God has control of the waters and only God can calm a raging sea.

So was God judging us for something we had done, or not done? Was that why the stormy waters were so vicious that night? And they were, we were scared. We were being tossed about like it didn't matter whether we lived or died.

And then through the spray and by the faint light of the moon we saw a ghostly figure walking on the water, actually on the water. So ghostly we thought it was a ghost and became very afraid, crying out in our terror. Was this a ghost come to get us? Had Jesus sent us out to meet our end?

But immediately "the ghost" spoke to us – with Jesus's voice. *"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."* Wow! Jesus understood how we felt and had come to us.

Of course we couldn't be absolutely sure that it was Jesus. And we were too dumbstruck to ask. All except Peter that is.

Peter stood up in the boat and cried to Jesus *"Lord, if it's you..."* I thought he was going to say "then come and join us in the boat". But he didn't. He said *"tell me to come to you on the water."* Crazy! But Jesus simply said *"Come"*.

It was insane. Only one of us could swim, and it wasn't Peter! We watched in horrified fascination as Peter got out of the boat and walked on - yes, actually walked on – the water, like Jesus, until he reached him. Peter always did have more confidence in Jesus than the rest of us and it was absolute trust that night kept him above the ferocious waves.

But then he stopped trusting in Jesus's word *"Come"* and focussed instead on the wind. It would have been so much stronger out there than in the partial shelter of the boat.

So Peter, bold, fearless Peter up to this point, got frightened by his situation and sank, panicking, into the waves. But, to be fair, he still had trust in Jesus, just not enough to keep him above the waves any longer. *'Lord, save me!'* he cried.

Jesus did of course. He took Peter by the hand and together they came into the boat. And as soon as they did the wind stopped just like that and it was dead calm. And there is no condemnation of Peter from Jesus – nor praise either - just an *"You of little faith why did you doubt?"*

I must say that Peter walking on the water didn't seem like *"little faith"* to me but I guess Jesus was looking for something more sustained. *"Why did you doubt?"* Clearly Jesus had power over the raging seas, just like God. He was God; we understood that now. And we worshipped him saying *"Truly you are the Son of God."*

And here I am, now, sheltering in another boat in another storm. Not on water – I am not getting wet - nor am I alone. There are others too. Here we are in the midst of the storms of life.

Fears over world situations and wars, troublesome relationships, health worries, financial concerns, life changes. We all encounter storms.

And often they come, as for the disciples, when we are already tired and without a lot in the way of resources to face them. We just want out for a while.

The way to cope is to hunker down in the boat, lean on one another. Because Jesus is here with us in the boat, in me as a believer, in us together, for two or three of us are gathered in his name so Jesus is here in the midst of us. He understands how we feel.

But what if Jesus is also outside the boat, stood in the storm? What if he is in the faces of those we see everyday, in person or on our screens? What if Jesus is saying *"Come"*? Come to me out here in the storm.

Come, I am hungry, I need something to eat.

Come, I am thirsty, I need refreshment.

Come, I am a lonely and need a friend.

Come, I cannot see the way ahead, come walk with me.

Come, I am broken-hearted and need a sympathetic shoulder to cry on.

Come, I am sick and need a visit.

Come, I am imprisoned by fear, drugs, alcohol, crime, infirmity or mental health issues.

Come, I need someone to tell me the good news of Jesus.

Come.

Perhaps, as we hunker down in the boat, even as we row harder to keep it afloat, when we are thinking that we are already doing enough, perhaps our biggest fear should be, not of sinking in the waves outside, but of failing to respond when Jesus says "Come, get out of the boat". Amen

Chris Shaw
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