

## Reflection for Pentecost 11 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

As we travel along life's winding journey, we may well find ourselves in situations that leave us feeling we are way out of our depth and, when that happens, we feel in total turmoil. It is as if everything is beginning to engulf us and trying to pull us down.

Think about learning to swim and the first time you push from the edge into water that is deeper than you are. You begin to question your ability: going through your mind is the question, will I sink or be able to stay afloat?

I always wonder what it must have been like for my father, who is not a good swimmer, when he was doing his military service in the air force on Sunderland flying boats and the first time he had a drill just in case one of the floats broke off. It involved running out along the wing to stabilize the other float - one slip and he would have been in the sea.

There are many things that can trigger such feelings of fear and insecurity - constant pressure, work piling up as fast as we shovel it away ... more just seems to mount up and it begins to overwhelm us.

Today's gospel reading makes some important points that speak into just such situations. Jesus is tired after the events recorded in the gospel, not least spiritually drained. He needs time and space to pray and recharge his batteries, so he goes off into the hills alone, something that you see him doing on several occasions.

Before going further in the story this is maybe the first thing we should note. Even Jesus gets tired physically and spiritually and needs to have a mechanism in place to rest and recharge his spiritual batteries. If this was important for Jesus what about ourselves?

Prayer and time spent with God is vital if we are to be effective witnesses for the kingdom of God, if we are to live out our faith in a dynamic way that touches those we encounter. Just as Jesus could not constantly give without the need to be feed fed and nurtured spiritually, the same is true for us and we must ensure that, within our often busy schedules, there is space and time to be alone with God. This could be in private prayer and the study of Scripture, but it could also in public worship - coming to God for the bread from heaven. When was the last time you or I considered some type of retreat?

However, while Jesus is at praying, the disciples find themselves in a very different place - struggling with one of Galilee's storms and, by the sounds of, it a fairly violent one.

Lake Galilee may not be the largest lake at only 14 miles by 8 miles, set some 700 feet below sea level, but it is prone to sudden and ferocious storms. If you sit by the lake towards evening even on a quiet day you will notice the breeze begin to come up and then die away - a breeze that can become a storm. This is due to convection air movements as result of the mountains that surround the lake and its altitude.

*"The boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them."* The disciples had no engine or outboard motor, only oars and, rowing into the head wind, they were getting nowhere and fearing for their lives.

In much ancient thinking the sea and storms are often associated with chaos and evil. Think of that wonderful picture of the new heaven and the new earth in Revelation 21 where we read this *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more."* Why no sea? It is because from the sea that great and evil monsters emerge in such apocalyptic writing.

It may well be that Matthew, in choosing to include this story in his gospel, is reminding the Christian community for whom he is writing his gospel of the way the storms of life create fears and get in the way of our walk of faith. One minute things seem OK the next we feel engulfed, and such storms can leave us chilled, cold and fearful, helpless, unable to move forward. Like the disciples, it is as much as we can do to remain stationary.

When all seems lost and the struggle is too great a figure comes towards the disciples - the figure of Jesus walking on the water. As their fear grows even more they hear his calming words *'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'*

What a wonderful image - Jesus walking across the chaos that is that storm, coming to his disciples. He does not wait on the shoreline until the storm is over, rather he comes to them during all that is going on.

This surely is good news - Christ's promise to be with us always. He is there bringing hope and strength in our moments of weakness and frailty. He is not frightened of the storm or the waves, it is through them that he comes to his disciples. What an image for each of us to hold onto!

The narrative does not end there but now we see Peter come to the fore at his most impetuous.

*Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.'* He said, *'Come.'*

Peter leaps out of the boat and starts to walk towards Jesus on the water. Quite literally he is out of his depth, his faith and his courage fail him. Peter wonders what on earth he is doing and, as he does so, begins to sink. His cry is *'Lord, save me!'*

Jesus at once reaches out his hand, catches Peter and lifts him above the water. And Jesus' next words must have echoed for a long time in Peter's ears: *'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'*

What Jesus is noting is the way Peter's focus had drifted - the situation around him, the waves and the water, had taken over his thinking, he had taken his eyes, his trust off Jesus as the water was lapping around his feet. With looking away from Jesus, came the desire to be self-sufficient and the water threatened to engulf him.

The same can be true for us, at those moments when we feel out of our depth. We focus on the problem and the pressures and take our eyes and our focus off Christ

Keeping our focus on Christ will not mean that we avoid the many situations life throws at us, but it will give clarity to them, which will give us the strength to see them through.

As our Lord came to the disciples he, too, will be there with us. Not only is he there his power is also greater than the highest wave or strongest wind. With our eyes on him the impossible becomes possible - we can be lifted from that which engulfs us just as Peter was.

*When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'* As they see God at work all they can do is offer praise and worship.

May that be our cry and focus this morning and every day.