

Dear Friends,

Matthew 14: 25-28

It's night. The friends of Jesus are in a boat struggling through a storm. Jesus has been far away, up a mountain. They may be wondering if he has abandoned them. But he has never lost sight of them. He has always been aware of their need. And now he is coming to them.

It's the fourth watch of the night. The Romans divided the time between 6pm and 6am into four equal periods or watches. So, it's between 3am and 6am. Jesus comes down the mountain. He sets foot upon the lake and comes towards them, walking on water.

Water in the Bible often means trouble. At the beginning of the book of Genesis we are told about some fierce and frightening elements that make up the chaotic abyss. There's darkness, wind and water. God tames the chaos and creates. But the chaos is never far away. We see it again when the flood brings devastation upon the earth. Jesus knows that people need to be saved from it when he calls his friends to fish for people, as though the people are up to their necks in a sea of troubles. Revelation says that in the new creation, when God makes all things new "There will be no more sea". As someone who grew up in Torquay, I love the sea and am not so fond of this verse. But I imagine the point is that there will be an end to those deep waters of trouble and suffering through which we so often pass; there will be an end to the stormy waves that buffet and threaten to break us. Water in the Bible often means trouble but Jesus walks, calmly, easily, comfortably on the water.

While the storm has been daunting, the disciples have not yet been described as being afraid. All this changes when Jesus comes walking towards them on the sea. They become terrified. They say, "It is a ghost!" They cry out in fear. The same word for fear is used here as elsewhere when people feel dread in the presence of something strange and unnatural. Other examples are when Zechariah meets an angel in the Temple, or when the friends of Jesus see him on the day of the resurrection and mistake him for a ghost. Immediately Jesus speaks to his frightened friends and says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid".

Many years before, Moses and the Israelites had been in an impossible situation. In front of them was the sea. Behind them the Egyptian chariots were getting nearer, because Pharaoh had changed his mind about letting them go. They were terrified. They did not dare to go forward and they were afraid to turn back. But Moses spoke to them and said, "Do not be afraid, stand firm and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today". God parted the troubling sea and they crossed easily and safely on dry ground with walls of water to their right and to their left.

As Moses said "Do not be afraid" so now Jesus says, "Take heart ... do not be afraid". Time and again the Bible insists that you "Do not be afraid". While it is

right to have a healthy awe and reverence before God, God never wants you to be frightened. Being frightened holds you back. It stops you from being free and alive.

And the one who takes away fear is Jesus. To his friends he says, "Take heart, it is I; Do not be afraid". He says "It is I. Your familiar friend. You recognise my voice. You know you can trust me". But he is also saying something more. "It is I" could be translated "I am". When Moses asked God's name, God said "I am who I am". As God is "I am who I am", so Jesus is "I am". In Psalm 77 it says "When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled ... Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen".

His words make them feel safe. They give them confidence. Peter's confidence gets so high that he dares to throw out a challenge to Jesus. He says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water". It's one thing for Jesus, who is "I am", to walk on the waters, but someone like Peter, someone like you. Surely not.

God bless you,

Tony