

Trust – Without Jesus we're sunk

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 17:1-7, 16

Romans 9:1-8

Matthew 14:22-36

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But **immediately** Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus **immediately** reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God".

When they had crossed over, they came to land at **Gennesaret**. After the people of that place recognised him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, and **begged** him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

This morning I want us to look at the gospel passage for today which is about Jesus walking on the water and Peter going out to meet him.

This story also appears in Mark's gospel, but Mark's version doesn't have Peter walking out to Jesus on the water. So why has Matthew added it? Because Matthew is writing to a community who needs to hear that Jesus can be relied upon even our faith wavers. If you look at the sequence of stories in Matthew and Mark, they all, in order, describe the death of John the Baptist, the feeding of the 5,000, and then Jesus walking on the water.

Matthew's version seems to be about trust and reassurance for a battered community. What is shown in Matthew's story here is Jesus' ability to save. Perhaps they were already beginning to see that Jesus was someone safe to be around, that he could provide for their needs. They had just seen him feed the 5,000 with 5 loaves and a few fish, and now they see him rescue Peter after his faith wavers.

But this story is also saying something else. Stories like these are called miracles because they have Jesus overriding the laws of nature. You don't normally feed 5,000 people with a few loaves of bread and some fish. And you certainly don't see people going around walking on water as a regular occurrence. This is Jesus defying the laws of nature. But, as Rikki Watts says, the problem with calling these things miracles is that it assumes that natural law is all there is to life, and that is not a biblical viewpoint. These 'miracles' are only outside the norm if we see these occurrences as outside the normal course of events.

These events might be unexpected, but they are only unexpected if I don't believe that God loves me. or, another way of putting it is, if I don't trust that God loves me. Rikki Watts chooses to call these events mighty deeds rather than miracles because in the way that God has put the world together they are simply another expression of his love. Tom Wright says that these deeds of Jesus are another way of the Kingdom of God breaking into history. And that is what Jesus was on about, the breaking in, indeed the

invasion, of the kingdom now, not just when we die. The Kingdom of God had come in the life and teaching of Jesus. Tom Wright calls these events not just something that invades our world from outside, but a dimension of our world which has died but which Jesus is bringing to life again. Jesus has come to put the world to rights, and that's actually why we are to work for justice, to be a part of the awesome task of bringing in God's kingdom.

[Trust game with a young person. Say that we don't know each other very well, so I want you to stand here and, keeping your legs straight, fall backwards and I will catch you. After they do it, ask them how they felt when I told them what I wanted them to do.]

If I am going to trust someone, I need to know that they are good. If I know they're not for me, how can I trust them? And what if you don't know, as in the case before when I asked this person to trust me? It's actions that always speak. If I would have dropped the person then it's a lot less likely that they would volunteer themselves again.

This passage teaches us a lot about trust. Little babies don't understand our words but they know when they're loved. Research done on baby monkeys has shown that if they get all the right nutrients but doesn't get love and an ability to bond, it struggled to survive.

It is said that the first 5 years of a person's life are the most crucial, because it is then that their sense of security and trust are shaped. It is in those years that they develop a sense of trust and begin to recognise whether or not they can trust someone who is there to look after them. In the late 1980s, after the brutality of the Ceausescu regime in Romania, there were so many orphans in that country whose lives had been shattered through their parents being unable to provide for them, so the children's ability to trust had been completely eroded.

One of the jobs of people working in the orphanages there was simply to go around and hug the children. At first the children were totally non-responsive, so the people kept going around each day and hugging them. And eventually the kids responded and their shattered emotions were slowly healing as they slowly learned to trust again.

As adults it's no different. Why is it that we have this natural tendency to doubt God, to doubt his goodness and to doubt that he is even there? What this story illustrates so clearly is that we cannot do life on our own. There is something in our makeup that is made for connection with something higher than ourselves. Since the dawn of humanity people have been searching for contentment and fulfillment, or inner peace. Whatever you want to call it, it's the same thing. And until we find it we are forever restless and we often find that the circumstances of life can overwhelm us.

Having said that however, notice that Jesus never writes Peter off once he starts sinking. He reaches out his hand and immediately pulls him back up. Jesus never gives up on Peter. And He doesn't condemn him for doubting.

The Bible is full of stories of great people of God doubting and their doubt leading them to a greater faith in God than they had before. Daryl Gardiner from Youth for Christ in New Zealand tells the story of what we call the Great Commission in Matthew 28. There it says that the 11 remaining disciples (remember that Judas had taken his own life by that stage) met Jesus on the mountain and worshiped him, but some doubted. Jesus'

response then was, again, not to say to the disciples, stop your doubting and get your lives sorted out before I send you out to make disciples. He simply commissioned them, despite their doubts. He knew they were frail human beings and he told them to make disciples just like they were, afraid, unsure and sometimes doubting. He told them to go out despite their doubts, not to let their doubts stop them and paralyse them.

Christian psychologist Larry Crabb says that each of us is born with an inclination to believe that God is not good, or at least not good enough to be fully trusted. We are born doubters. And as life goes on and our experiences of life increase, we often trust less in the goodness of God.

When we doubt God's goodness, we begin to trust ourselves, and that's where we fall over. And I have to say that much of the church has fallen for it as well. In a culture where we are told that we are the most important person in the world, much of the church has been sucked right in and gone along for the ride. The only difference is that we put God language around it. In many churches the message is more 'what can God do for me?' than 'what can I do for God?' It's 'God wants you to be happy, he wants you to enjoy life.' As Larry Crabb says, "depend on God to help you realise your greatest and most worthy ambition: the enjoyment of yourself". And so God has become a means to an end rather than the end himself.

It was St Augustine who said, about God, that

"the thought of you stirs us so deeply that we cannot be content unless we praise you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you".

What we have today is a subtle twist on that, where we are told that we can't love others until we love ourselves first and we need to build our self-esteem before we can get on with our lives.

What this story illustrates is actually the complete opposite of what we hear today in many churches and we have to be careful that we don't fall for it ourselves. Life and a healthy sense of self-worth is found only the more we look at Jesus for our life, not the more we look at ourselves. Constantly in the gospels, Jesus says, follow me. He also said 'if you look to find your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it.'

I remember being in a Christian bookshop some years ago and I saw a book called 'Body by God' which was one of these books that told you how God has made us wonderful people and wants us to be fabulously beautiful and, in this case, to have great bodies. And immediately below was a book by Max Lucado with the simple title, "It's Not About Me". The contrast couldn't have been more striking.

This is about focus on Jesus and not on us. 20 years ago when I was a young Christian, we used to go to an old people's home in our suburb and have a church service for them on a Sunday afternoon, and one of the hymns those old folks always loved to sing was 'Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.' There is truth in that old hymn. I know that it's never as easy as that for some of us, especially if you've suffered from church abuse and been treated like God is up there waving a big stick to smite you. But it's only as we look at the life of Jesus and see how

he treated broken people like us that we see that he stands worthy of our trust. For many of us it takes years to learn to trust anyone again, but when we do, we begin to heal and we want to take more risks and walk in faith to love and learn to serve our fellow human beings.

The blessing of God is not found by using God as a means to make ourselves happy. The blessing of God is in serving others, in being a part of the awesome project of bringing in his kingdom. Martin Luther King said that "life's most persistent question is 'what are we doing for others?'" That is where life is found, when Jesus is our focus and how we can be like him, to know the joy of service, to know what it is to love other people and to see what love can do in broken lives. This is the message of God right throughout the Bible.

But it's not just the church that has fallen for this. It's our society as a whole. We are constantly sold the message that it's an experience that is what counts. Life could be a dream if you win the lotto. It's a lie. The fact is we can't control our lives. However much we think we can, we can't. There is an old saying which says "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul". You are NOT the master of your fate. You could go out and die in a car accident on your way home tonight. We are NOT in charge of our lives.

That hit home to me a few weeks ago when I was almost hit by a car on the way home from work one night. I was walking across the road at the lights, the light was green, and all of a sudden out of the corner of my eye I saw this car coming around the corner towards me. The driver slammed on the brakes and I had to jump out of the way or I would have been hit. Luckily the driver wasn't going that fast because she was turning a corner. We never know when our time is up. We are NOT in charge of our lives. You are not the master of your fate. Jesus is the master of your fate, and there is nothing else in the universe in which we will find the life we're really after.

Life is found in the simple and yet difficult path of trust. It's scary, you're uncertain at times, you will take some hits. But you will also experience the thrill of really living. When we step out of the boat and follow Jesus we will know what life is all about. When we take the risk of stepping out in faith, a quiet excitement builds up within us. We've lost that in our society. Listen to what Benjamin Carson, in his book, 'Take the Risk', says:

"In our culture, security has become an obsession. It dictates everything from public policy to [advertising], from medical care to education and personal and family life. We buy every kind of insurance — from life insurance to replacement policies for our cell phones — to provide us with the security we think we need. We pay extra for warranties on our computers and appliances. We read safety test results in Consumer Reports before buying a [car]. We purchase safety seats to keep our children secure and safety helmets for them to wear on their bike rides around the block. We buy flame-retardant pyjamas for our kids and wouldn't think of purchasing aspirin (or any other medicine) that didn't come in a tamperproof container. We go on low-cholesterol diets, exercise regularly, and make sure we get regular dental and medical checkups to protect our health. We invest in low-risk mutual funds in an attempt to ensure a comfortable retirement. Our nation spends billions of dollars on equipment and manpower to keep airports and air travel as safe as possible. What we're buying and what everyone is selling us is the promise of "security." And yet the only thing we can be sure of

is that someday every one of us will die. Could this fact have something to say about our view of risk-taking? And how might that impact our vocations, our personal lives and relationships, or our faith? Anyone who refuses to test his limits, anyone unwilling to move out of her comfort zone, is destined to live life inside the envelope."

The risk of stepping out of the boat is also emphasised in this quote from C.S. Lewis (The Four Loves)

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket -- safe, dark, motionless, airless -- it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

It's ok to doubt, but it's also crucial that we work on them and don't wallow in them and feel sorry for ourselves.

Jesus always beckons us to step out of the boat and keep our eyes on him, but like Peter and the other disciples we are stricken by doubt and fear. But the opposite of fear is faith. When Peter got out of the boat and came toward Jesus walking on the sea toward him, he was totally focused on him, and he was, quite literally, walking by faith.

God never gives up on us, despite our fears, insecurities and doubts. When we take the risk and exercise faith, we learn to trust despite our circumstances and we can begin to see that we don't need to try to do it on our own because we've tried it and it doesn't work. You know there is a saying that insanity is trying the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Following Jesus brings us back to sanity and wholeness, as we step out of the boat and walk towards him. It's risky, it's dangerous, it's scary, it's thrilling, it's disturbing, it's exciting, it sometimes hurts. The journey of faith is all those things in one, and when you get a taste of it, the alternative pales into insignificance.

When many of Jesus' followers were leaving him because they found it all too hard, and he asked the 12 if they wanted to leave as well, Peter famously said, 'to whom else would we turn? You have the words of eternal life'.

It seems like Peter was starting to get it, and this might be why, when they get back in the boat after he has picked up Peter out of the water, they worshiped him and said that he was the Son of God.

When life is overwhelming and you're sinking beneath the waves, we have every right to call out to Jesus and ask him to save us. John Mellencamp, on his latest album, has a song in which he cries out to Jesus about the inhumanity in the world and his own personal weakness. He comes to the conclusion that he wants Jesus to 'give him a ride back home' as he sings in that song. Jesus' life demonstrated the invasion of the kingdom of God into history. Even though we doubt, even though we fear, Jesus reaches down and takes us by the hand and says don't be afraid. As Augustine said all those years ago, we are forever restless until we find our home in him. Peter, ever the bold one, stepped out in faith, doubted, and made a horrible mess of it. But who was it that Jesus made the pillar of his community after his resurrection? Peter, the one who

failed miserably, just like we often do.

Today's story gives us hope that, despite our doubts, despite our failings, despite our constantly stuffing up when we make promise after promise that we'll never do this or that again, that it is in trust in Him that we find life. It's not about us, it's about Him.

It can be scary, but it's ok. We have Jesus, and we have each other in community. In a society that promises everything but fails dismally to deliver, nothing else will satisfy but putting our hand in the hand of him who lifts us out of the water and brings us back home.

by Nils von Kalm

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