

SERMON AT GELORUP 9TH AUGUST 2020: GEOFF CHADWICK
10TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST OS 19:
MTT 14:22-36: SURFCAM

Matthew 14.22-36

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' ²⁸ Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' ²⁹ He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.' ³⁴ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. ³⁵ After the people of that place recognized him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, ³⁶ and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Some years ago, one evening on boarding duty at the school, I overheard some of the "likely lads" discussing the weather reports. Mostly they were interested in the wind and sea conditions forecast for the next day. Nevertheless, they were saying thing like:

"Margaret River looks a bit rough."

"Trigg looks pretty good."

"No there's too much wash at Gracetown." and so on.

Intrigued by their unusual intimate knowledge of the sea conditions, I finally asked them;

"How do you know so much about the sea."

"Oh, it's easy, Fr Geoff. We just look it up on Surfcam."

"Surfcam?" What's that I asked.

Looking like someone who was born in the last century- which I was- they said to me: *'We can show you.'*

And so, I was directed to the *Surf-cam* App on their computer.

“There’s cameras posted at all the good surfing beaches in WA. All you have to do is click on the beach you want, and you can see the surf conditions live”. It saves time travelling from beach to beach when you’re looking for a good surfing spot. Wanna see what Margaret River’s like?”

“Sure” I said, and was directed to click on the appropriate camera link. Up beamed a picture of total darkness.

“Oh no! What have I done wrong?” I exclaimed.

There was a pause and then one of the boys remarked: *“O yeah, but you can’t see anything at night time!”*

So much for *Surf-cam* if you want to go surfing at night! But do surfers do that?

(Incidentally I was told the other day that the Back-Beach surf-cam only lasted 3 days. It was destroyed by the last Bunbury storm!)

So, I wonder, if Jesus’ disciples would have ventured onto the lake if *Surf-cam* was around in Jesus’ time. But then again, the biblical text says it was evening so one of those disciples would have said: “Oh yeah, you can’t see anything at night time!”

Who wants to be in the middle of a lake, in the middle of a storm at night time? No one! But there they were – that little navy of disciples huddled together in fear.

There are many ways to interpret this story, but my favourite is to treat it as an allegory of the situation of the early church. The first audience for Matthew’s gospel is his fledgling little church. The *water-walking* story of Jesus has been remembered and has been put into the Gospel to address the issues facing the people at that time. Here are some clues that suggest this.

Firstly, there’s the reference to a boat. The early church likened itself to a crew in a boat. Even parts of their church buildings are named after parts of a boat. For example, you, sitting here are in the

“nave”. That’s because you are the “navy” of this fine vessel. I’m standing here at the *pulpit* - otherwise known as the *poop-deck* - where the captain issued his orders. (So much for servant leadership!)

Secondly, Jesus has left the mob and gone up to a mountain to pray. This suggests his Ascension. It appears that the early church had issues with an absent Jesus.

Where is he when we need him? Oh yeah – he’s gone to the mountain top.

Thirdly, the fearful storm is a nod to the persecution of the early church. You will recall that early church faced much opposition and suffered much violence. Saul (later Paul), in particular, loved to round up those who had converted from Judaism. Also in AD 70 Jerusalem was incinerated by the Romans. Matthew written in AD 90, knows of these events only too well.

Fourthly, Peter has left the boat. This suggests a leadership crisis. Remember Peter went off to Rome and, according to legend, was crucified up-side-down.

So, now, the church members- that little navy stuck in a storm in the middle of the night- cry out for a saviour.

“Will Jesus return? Has Peter abandoned us? Oh boy we could do with a saviour right now?!”

Fifthly, there’s a Christological crisis going on. It’s all about whether Jesus was real or not. Was he a ghost or truly human? This crisis is played out in just a few verses of our Gospel reading. It begins with mistaken identity:

“It is a ghost!” they say (Mtt 14:26,NRSV). (Or a *phantom* as it says in the Greek)

Then:

“But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’” (Mtt 14:27, NRSV).

The early church struggled with the physicality of Jesus. Was he human, divine or both?

Back then it was a troubling philosophical and theological problem. So here in the Gospel the writer is making the point- one which I often make to my students- “*Yes, Jesus is real!*”

In the story the saviour, who is not a ghost, returns. Even Peter gets chastised for doubting even as he is being hauled back into the boat. The words “*You of little faith, why did you doubt*” (Mtt 14:31, NRSV) whilst being hurled at Peter, are also for those in the boat. They’re probably just pleased that Peter got the rap, not them!

(Curiously, only, Mtt has this story of Peter and his chastisement. This is further evidence of Mtt shaping the story to address the needs of his early church.)

Sixthly, there is good news! Jesus, gets into the boat even when it is full of a bunch of terrified, doubtful members. It’s an action of hope to people under pressure. It’s hard for us to imagine just how difficult it was for those early followers of Jesus to keep their faith in the midst of such a hostile world. These early Christians were longing for calm! They were in danger of losing their faith. Quite likely there were losing members either to fear or violence. Their only means of support was to huddle together in what seemed like a sinking ship. All they could do was to support the rest of their little navy as best they could. Those who had not abandoned ship and were hoping beyond hope that peace and stability would come. More than this, they hoped beyond hope that Jesus was in the boat with them. Without him, all would be lost.

Finally, the storm does pass and immediately the navy, the disciples are put to work!

The work of ministry resumes. The fringe dwellers come – seeking healing and wholeness. And all are healed. Despite the storm the goodness of God lives on!

So what are we going to make of this story for today?

There is a storm! The Corona Virus Pandemic has us worried. We are all at sea! We’ve been told to take refuge in our own “little navy boats” of safety. Parts of the world we wonder if their leaders have

abandoned them. There has been unrest and even violence. Some have lost their faith wondering if it's merely a ghost of a once long held belief. Some are in fear, some are angry, some feel helpless and some are in denial. This sounds like a terrible storm in the middle of the night.

We may ask: *Will our Saviour come?*

We may wonder: *Will things get back to normal?*

We may also wonder: *What should the real ministry of the church be at this time?*

In the midst of this storm of the night, we must hold onto hope. This is not simple wishful thinking based on our own strength, but is something that runs deeper within us. This hope is not a ghost. It is real hope based on the simple fact that Jesus has not abandoned us. Jesus is in the boat with us. His presence is real. We may be fearfully huddled, but he's in the huddle with us.

Surely the storm will pass- when and how we do not know. Meanwhile we must not abandon our own little navies. After all there will soon be work ahead even at the fayed ends of our fringes.

The lord be with you.

And also with you.