

**Sermon by Sister Margaret Anne for 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity 10am Parish Eucharist St Mary's Barnes 9 August 2020**

What an extraordinary year 2020 is turning out to be. Back in the early Spring we had little idea of what the next few months would bring us: a global pandemic and people dying of Covid 19 in distressingly large numbers, and the ensuing lockdown. The whole experience has been tragic world-wide and we are still adjusting to the consequences of how all our lives have been so radically changed. Yet good things have come out of the tragedy, and we appreciate our NHS and other health professionals as never before. Their faithful and courageous service is an example to us all.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons we have learned through all this is the centrality of human kindness, compassion and love. Most if not all of us have probably been reflecting in this strange time on what values we hold most dear, and there may have been quite an adjustment to our thinking. Particularly for those who live alone, what a joy it was when at last we were able to meet face to face with someone we knew from another household. Technology such as Skype and Zoom and video-conferencing has really come into its own, and has huge benefits, but at the end of the day there is nothing to replace actually (rather than virtually) being in the presence of another. That is always the most precious form of communication.

It has often been remarked that Covid 19 has thrown a spotlight on many of the ills of society, such as racial inequality or poor working conditions. It is as if there is a great clean-up going on in society, not just literally, but also morally and spiritually. Many are determined to do things better and not go back to the old ways. There has been a lot of fear in recent months, particularly fear of catching or spreading Covid 19. And that fear is natural and inevitable. But we cannot let our whole lives continue to be ruled by fear. There comes a time when we need to attempt at least to let go of fear. We take the necessary precautions, yes, both for our sakes and for the sake of others. But we do so, hopefully, in a spirit of love rather than fear. We are not to be despondent or despairing. That, at least spiritually, would be a mistake. Our first reading today from the First Book of Kings ( 1 Kings 19.9-18) in the Old Testament can help us. It is about the great prophet Elijah. Elijah was a prophet mighty in word and deed. To give the context of our reading, Elijah had recently had a great double triumph. He had shown up very dramatically the false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The prophets of Baal were unable to call down fire from heaven – whereas Elijah could do so. And when there was a drought, Elijah was able to prophesy the coming of rain. Elijah must have been on cloud 9. Twice in succession God had confirmed the authenticity of his prophetic powers in a very dramatic and undeniable manner.

But Elijah had his enemies, notably Jezebel the wife of the wicked king Ahab. When Jezebel threatens to kill Elijah, Elijah is fearfully intimidated and runs away. He flees to the wilderness. Elijah is thoroughly downcast and depressed and he will not even eat. Then an angel tells him to eat and he does so, and journeys on to Mount Horeb and spends the night in a cave. This is where our first reading begins. Suddenly Elijah hears God asking him,

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah gives a defensive speech. He is told to stand on the mountain side. A great storm arises, but God is in none of this. Instead, in the form of a still, small voice, Elijah becomes aware of a profound inner silence; he obediently leaves the cave and hears once more God asking him the question,

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Yet again, Elijah makes his defensive, self-justifying speech. But God is not interested in that. Instead God makes it clear to Elijah that there are still tasks for Elijah to perform. His prophetic ministry is not over. The moral of the story? The outlook may look grim, we may feel downcast and afraid, but we still have to keep going, and give of our best to God.

Our gospel reading for today from Matthew ( Matthew 14.22-33) has a similar message. It is Matthew's account of the miracle story of Jesus Walking on the Water. The story also occurs in Mark and John's gospels, but not, curiously, in Luke. In all three gospels in which it appears, it follows on from the miracle story of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus has provided for the people in terms of their physical needs. Now, he will provide for them by meeting their needs on a different level. Those hearing the story of the Walking on the Water in Jesus' day would have been aware of themes echoed elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures. In the Old Testament the sea is often symbolic of chaos and disorder. In the Exodus story the Israelites had escaped dry-shod through the Red Sea. Jesus here walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee would have cast him in the light of a spiritual hero like Moses leading his people to safety.

Jesus has gone to the mountain to pray, while his disciples who have got into a boat, are frightened because a stormy wind has blown up. Then the miracle happens. Jesus is seen walking towards them on the water. The disciples at this become even more terrified, but Jesus proclaims:

“Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid”.

It is only Matthew's account of this story that then includes Peter. Peter, characteristically spontaneous and enthusiastic, offers to come to Jesus on the water. Jesus says, “Come”. At first Peter does well, but then he takes his eyes off Jesus, focuses on the cause of his fears, the unruly waves, and begins to sink. He cries to Jesus to save him. Jesus reaches out his hand, and rescues Peter. What is important is that Jesus does not simply rescue Peter in bodily form. He saves Peter from his fears, his doubts, his uncertainties and anxieties, his helplessness.

What Jesus did for Peter, what God did for Elijah, God can also do for us. As lockdown restrictions are gradually eased, and mindful that such restrictions can be reversed should the spread of Covid 19 rise again, we will all no doubt still have our own fears and uncertainties and unanswered questions about the future. The artist Roger Wagner in his painting entitled Walking on the Water III, painted in 1995, startlingly reminds us that these ancient stories of Jesus' miracles are very relevant to our present day. For he sets the scene not in Galilee but rather on the River Thames with Battersea Power Station in the background. The two figures on the water, one dressed in white the other in blue, stretch out their hands to one another. One could be forgiven for not being sure which figure is which. Is Jesus in white, or blue? Jesus too knew his fears, notably in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he died by crucifixion. Jesus in his earthly form was fully human as well as fully divine. Whatever terrifying emotions and prospects we might experience in this life, he knew all that too. He knew it all too well.

So in the midst of this global crisis that we are all going through, let us take heart from today's readings. God is always wanting to communicate something to us, most especially messages of truth and love. And today through our readings God is communicating to us that however tough the going gets, and it is and indeed will be tough, nevertheless God in Christ walks with us, accompanies us, sustains us and loves us to the very end. Of that, through our Christian faith, we may be confident.

And so to God, creator, redeemer, sanctifier, we give all honour and praise and thanksgiving as we journey on, knowing who accompanies and encourages us, now and always. Amen.

