

Prayer

Powerful Lord, giver of life and sustainer of our every breath; lift the burden of our sins, comfort our hurting souls and bring peace to our lives as we live and work for You. You are the source of all things; You are the foundation of all that is good; and You are the one who made me. Thank You, Lord God, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire Services

Pray today about the way in which fire safety is promoted and taught in schools, institutions, offices and industries. Pray that what is learned will save lives.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for President Obama as he deals with the Middle East.*
- *Pray about population growth and the moral issues it raises*
- *Give thanks for new life, and God's gift of children to parents*

Meditation

When life is quiet, Lord Jesus, fill my mind with what is good,
So I may keep the enemy far away from all my thoughts.

When life is routine, Lord Jesus, give me the concentration I need
So I may honour You with every detail of my work

When life is difficult, Lord Jesus, save me from all fear and panic,
So I can focus on the truth and trust Your guidance.

When life is awful, Lord Jesus, give me courage and persistence;
So I may use the Spirit's gifts to deal with trouble.

When life is easier, Lord Jesus, may I not forget Your love;
So I remember faithfulness, and follow in Your ways.

When life is quiet, Lord Jesus, fill my mind with what is good;
So I am ever ready and alert, Your faithful, loyal servant.

Bible Study - Matthew 14:28-36

²⁸ Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.'²⁹ So he said, 'Come.' Peter got out of the boat, and started walking on the water towards Jesus.³⁰ But when he saw the strong wind he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he shouted out, 'Lord, save me!'³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him. 'O you of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?'³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.³³ Then those in the boat worshiped him and said, 'You really are the Son of God.'

³⁴ After the crossing, they came to land at Gennesaret.³⁵ The people of that place recognized him, and sent word around the entire neighbourhood, and they brought to him all those who were sick,³⁶ begging him to let them touch even the edge of his clothes; and all who touched were healed.

Review

Only Matthew records this famous story of Peter's 'walking on the water'. It is an extraordinary event by any standards, and one which generations of Christians have found helpful in learning about faith. If you have followed recent studies in Matthew you will know that Jesus had been attempting to speak to the disciples by themselves for some time, to teach them about something important; and in this story, we discover that this was faith. However, Jesus had already taught about faith in the form of a parable (13:34f.). The disciples did not need to hear more about faith, they needed some practical lessons in faith, about how to show it, confess it and live it. We will discover that these are the themes that surround much of what happens in the coming stories of Matthew's Gospel.

What we have read today follows on immediately from the famous incident when Jesus walked on the water Himself, and came towards the disciples across Lake Galilee in the middle of a storm. The circumstances were somewhat testing. The disciples had rowed all night against a headwind, it seems, for they had made little progress, and it was now dawn. In the changing light of the morning, Jesus approached them and startled them, causing the disciples to think they had seen a ghost (14:26). Jesus' words of reassurance were designed to calm their fears, but what would they do?

At the beginning of our passage, the attention switches immediately to Peter. Perhaps he did indeed perceive that what was happening at that moment was quite different from when Jesus had been with them in the storm on the lake (see 8:23-27). On that occasion, Jesus had chastised the disciples, albeit gently, with the words, 'O you of little faith'. So, with the miraculous sight of Jesus walking on the water in front of him, he sought Jesus' permission to do the same. He knew that nothing was possible without a command from the Lord.

A thousand sermons have been preached on what happened next, but the story in Matthew is simplicity itself. Jesus called to Peter to 'Come'; Peter left the safety of the boat and began walking towards Jesus on the water. Then he became frightened by the storm around him and began to sink; he then called out to Jesus, who then reached out His hand to hold him. He then repeated what He had said on the first occasion He was in a storm on Lake Galilee with the disciples; 'O you of little faith,' but this time He added, why did you doubt?' It was a serious question. There was no reason for Peter's faith to fail, but it had. It was not a question that Jesus had to answer, it was something Peter had to deal with himself.

However, the story is not all about Peter. His spiritual journey is important for the story of Jesus' ministry in Matthew, as we will find out in chapter 16, but the other disciples were also important. They were utterly amazed; they had seen what Peter had done and how Jesus had saved him, and for the first recorded time in the Gospel, they, 'worshipped Him' (14:33)! They had not taken part in the 'walking on water', but they had seen and believed that Jesus was divine. No Jew would worship unless they were convinced that God was present.

Lastly, the disciples came to land with Jesus at a place called Genessaret (see later study). What happened there confirms what we concluded at the beginning of Matthew 14, which was that although Jesus was indeed turning away from his successful public ministry in Galilee to head towards Jerusalem, He still ministered willingly to the crowds who flocked to Him, successfully helping them in whatever condition they came to Him. The Messiah could never cease to be compassionate, and despite the extensive ministry of healing and deliverance already conducted by Jesus, there were still thousands more people who needed His help. They still do to this day.

yet in the boat, he was still in the water, not sinking, but held by God. This itself is an illustration of a great deal of what we experience of the life of faith. We are on a journey of faith, just like Peter, and this is tested and refined through the call of our Lord, and the trials of life in which our Lord 'holds' us. Peter's faith was far from perfect, and there is more for us to learn about it still to come in Matthew's Gospel, including his further occasional doubts. However, all of us who are Jesus' disciples today recognise that this story is a remarkable parable of faith, from which we learn a great deal.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Which is most significant in this story, what happens to Peter, to the disciples, or the crowds?
2. Discuss in your group, in what ways can you identify with the experience of Peter?
3. Recall events that have caused everyone in your church to give thanks to God spontaneously, and praise Him. Does this happen often? What does this say about your church?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find this passage of Scripture immensely reassuring. If Peter was able to jump in and fail, so can I! In addition, if I see another disciple jump in and fail, then my place is not to criticise, but to worship the Lord who is able to rescue and help, and save. Most of all, this passage tells me that you have to have faith to get off the side of the boat, but this of itself is not more than 'little faith', and much more is required for the complexities of life.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *The challenge from today's reading is clear. It is to accept that failure is part of the journey of faith, and something that points others to Christ. To what extent does your own life reflect such faith? Ask the Lord to lead you 'out of the boat' so that you may grow in faith.*
- *I have found that when faced with the difficult challenges, people frequently doubt their ability to do what God requires. It is a hard lesson to learn that such doubt is not doubt of self, but doubt of God, who calls and leads. Ask the Lord to help you exercise trust in Him in the everyday things of life.*

Final Prayer

Your warmth, Lord Jesus, is like the sun that bursts through the clouds on an overcast day, bringing not only light and warmth, but colour, vitality and new life. May we always be open to receive Your warmth and love, because it is Your unconditional gift. Thank You Jesus; AMEN

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- What did it mean for Peter to walk on the water (14:28-31)?
- What can we learn about discipleship in this text (14:28-36)?
- Was faith expressed in worshipping Jesus (14:32,33)?
- Why was Jesus still concerned for the sick (14:34-36)?

Notes on the text and translation

V28 *'tell me to come to you'* You will find that most Bible versions have the phrase 'command me to come to you', which, although it is entirely correct, does not sound quite right to our ears; we might expect 'let me come ...' as if Peter sought permission. However, Peter does indeed ask Jesus to order him to come, and the soft form of a command in English is 'tell ...', which sounds much better in English.

V 29 *'and started walking on the water towards Jesus'* This is different from many Bible versions that have 'walked on the water and came to Jesus', which, on the surface, appears to reflect the Greek accurately. However, the expression 'walked ... and came' does not make for good Greek, so much so that it was altered by some of the copyists responsible for the early manuscripts of Matthew. Everything is resolved if we realise that Matthew used a Hebrew 'manner of speech' here, which normally describes the beginning of an action; hence my translation. This gives an interesting nuance to the whole passage.

V30 *'But when he saw the strong wind'* It has long been recognised that most of the ancient manuscripts of Matthew do not have the adjective 'strong' in this sentence. However, all of these represent one particular literary 'style', and a wider range of other less significant copies have the word 'strong'. It is thought that in this case, the original text of Matthew's Gospel is preserved by the wide range of minor copies. Without the word 'strong', Peter's fear seems rather irrational.

V36 *'and all who touched were healed.'* We might expect the text to read 'all who touched Him', or 'all who touched it', but it does not. The scene is of desperation, and Matthew seems to say 'a touch was enough', and people were healed.

Going Deeper

What did it mean for Peter to walk on the water (14:28-31)?

The disciples were in a state of shock, having seen Jesus walking on the water in the early hours and during a raging storm (14:24,25). Jesus had called out 'Courage, I am here! Don't be afraid' (14:27) but it is hard to imagine what the disciples must have felt. Peter replied, 'Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water!' One can imagine the two shouting to each other above the noise of the storm, and Peter's request was profoundly rash in the circumstances. It was a storm in which hardy sailors feared for their lives; who would risk all and climb out of the boat?

In the midst of the drama, we might easily miss a simple fact, which is that this was one of the first times that a disciple addressed Jesus personally as 'Lord'. Other people had addressed Jesus as 'Lord' when they were asking Him to perform a miracle (8:2,21; 9:28), and the disciples had called out to Jesus in distress 'Lord save us' in the earlier storm (8:25). However, coming immediately after Jesus had called out to the disciples 'It is I', (14:27) using the divine name of the God (see yesterday's notes), it was highly significant that Peter should confirm this by addressing Him as 'Lord' at this point. With these words, Peter virtually accepted that Jesus was divine! Much is made of the great statement of faith made later by Peter ('You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God' – Matt 16:16), yet

this very similar but less obvious statement of faith by Peter was an essential part of his journey towards understanding who Jesus was.

What can we learn about discipleship in this text (14:28-36)?

If Peter had walked on the water for a little bit and jumped back into the boat after his initial success, then he would have been able to say to everyone else in the boat 'I did it!' and the focus of attention would be on him. The disciples would have said 'Thanks' to Jesus (they had seen Him do many miraculous things before), and been amazed at what Peter had done. This, of course was not what happened, and although what did happen was embarrassing to Peter, it proved to be a powerful learning point for all the disciples.

We are wrong to say, however, that Peter did not 'walk on water'. Verse 29 is clear that Peter did in fact 'walk on water'. He got out of the boat at Jesus' beckoning, and walked on the water towards Jesus, even with the wind and the waves! At some point, however, and it almost seems inevitable, Peter was distracted by the tempest around him, and he found himself floundering in the water without having reached Jesus. At this point, he cried out 'Lord, save me' (as the disciples had done in the previous story of a boat in a storm - 8:25), and Jesus took hold of him and they both clambered into the boat (14:32).

There are two things that are worth remembering about this; firstly, the comment of Jesus to Peter 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' Jesus used these words previously (8:26, 14:31) but they are not, in my opinion, a harsh rebuke. They are like the words of a parent to a child, wanting the youngster to grow up and do better, and knowing that this would come. Jesus had already spoken about faith 'as small as a mustard seed' being very powerful (13:31,32), and He knew that the disciple's 'little faith' would grow. Further, the word 'doubt' is important. In Greek, it means 'to be in two minds' about something, a state of mind in which it is almost impossible for someone to make a firm decision. Peter experienced 'doubt' as the storm swelled around him, fearful of the waves and without familiar support, he was unable to make a decision. Jesus took hold of him in the midst of his doubt and brought him to safety, but the experience was probably a great shock!

Secondly, what happened to Peter is typical of a path of discipleship, even to this day. Peter attempted to do something by faith at the beckoning of Jesus; he started, failed, and had to be rescued. This is what was experienced by the psalmists who wrote in scripture: 'He reached from on high, He took me, He drew me out of many waters' (Ps 18:15-16); and also 'stretch out your hand from on high, rescue and deliver me from the many waters' (Ps 144:5-8). The psalms give personal testimony to the life of faith from an Old Testament perspective, including requests for deliverance from all kinds of personal trial. In the New Testament, however, we now know that we are saved from the power of death and evil, but just like Peter and the psalmist, our life of discipleship is one of trial, failure and rescue.

Was faith expressed in worshipping Jesus (14:32,33)?

Meanwhile, back in the boat, the other disciples were watching what was going on. Peter was exercising his own 'little' faith by failing and being rescued, the experience of the other disciples was quite different. However, it was just as important for the whole story and it tells us a little about their faith.

Verse 33 is not easy to translate, but the strong implication is that those who said 'You really are the Son of God!' were the disciples who had remained in the boat, watching what was going on. Remember, if Peter had been able to nip back into the boat after his initial success on the water, then the attention would have been on him, but now it was firmly back on Jesus. Peter's difficult experience had, in truth, drawn the attention of the disciples to the power and authority of Jesus. Not only did He have command of the 'wind and

waves' both in this and the previous incident of 'calming the storm' but He fulfilled scripture by visibly 'saving the perishing'.

The response of the disciples was that they 'worshipped Him'. This, like Peter's cry 'Lord' (14:28) was a first for the Gospel. It was the first time that the disciples had faith enough to 'worship' Jesus, which indicated their clear acceptance of Jesus' power and authority, not just as God's Messiah, but as divine Himself. Today we are so used to hearing these Gospel stories in a hotchpotch manner according to church liturgies, we do not quickly spot the importance of phrases like this which we have heard before so many times. Jesus was indeed beginning to teach the disciples some important truths about faith, and they were learning, even though Peter's experience was, in this case, quite different from the others!

Why was Jesus still concerned for the sick (14:34-36)?

As Jesus and the disciples landed on the south-west of Lake Galilee in a region called Gennesaret near Capernaum, it was a foregone conclusion that large numbers would recognise Jesus; after all, this was 'home territory' for Him. However, Matthew simply records the continuing ministry of Jesus to the crowds, focussed around His healing of the sick. Jesus had healed the sick many times before, and the crowds came primarily so that He could continue to meet their needs; so many, in fact, that people were cured even from the touch of His clothes (14:36). The words of the text implies (see notes above) that there was no end to this ministry, and Jesus could have continued doing this for years. His purpose of course, was higher, so although he met the need presented to him, His heart lay in the salvation of all and for the sins of the world.

This was all so different from the ministry Jesus was now developing with the disciples. The comparison between Jesus' work with His disciples and His ministry to the crowds foreshadows His ministry to the Church and that to the world. With the latter he continued, with empathy and care, to meet people's needs, and it is a ministry to which he calls His Church. With His own disciples, however, he longed to teach them the deeper things of faith.

Application

The question that arises directly from this last part of our passage today is this; do we continue to come to Jesus simply to have our needs met? If this is the case, we are simply behaving like the crowds. Alternatively, are we prepared for the exciting and challenging experiences of faith by which our Lord teaches us, like Peter, how to face trouble, receive his help and through Him, overcome all things? These are questions that are pertinent for us as individuals and also for our churches. Too often, it seems that what happens when Christians gather together is more like crowds gathering to ask Jesus for His usual help and favours, rather than a people keenly determined to learn the hard lessons of faith, and take the risks!

We all know what it is to walk, fall and be helped, many times over. This has always been the path of growth in any human endeavour, and Jesus teaches us through this story of Peter that it is the path of discipleship as well. What is important is that Peter took the first step into the unknown, and this enabled everything else in the story to unfold, the lessons of faith and the worship of the disciples. Peter was able to take that step because of his growing faith in Jesus, and because despite his doubts, he had sufficient confidence in Jesus to act. This is not a bad place from which to start. If we walk boldly as Peter did, then there is always the risk of failure along the way, but if we know that the Lord is ready to reach out to us, then the storms all around increasingly feel less significant.

There is one other point in the story worth dwelling on. At the very moment that Jesus took hold of Peter, his doubts were addressed, and he was 'held' by Jesus. Note, he was not