



Matthew 14:22–33

22 Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. 23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, 24 and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. 25 Shortly before dawn Jesus went

out to them, walking on the lake. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear. 27 But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” 28 “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.” 29 “Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” 32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. 33 Then those who were in the boat

worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Reflection

Jesus has just performed arguably his most famous miracle in all of the gospels, the feeding of the five thousand, only for some reason in coming up with that number, Matthew has only counted the men. Why would he do that? If there were really as many as 20,000 people there, men, women and children, why not call it the feeding of the 20,000? Surely that would be even more impressive.

Matthew’s point is that 5,000 men makes for quite an impressive army. You see, Jewish nationalistic tensions are simmering, threatening boiling point. Word has

spread that Herod Antipas has just brutally murdered the much loved and highly respected prophet, John the Baptist. Jesus is grieving his death privately, as no doubt were many people amongst the crowd. It's also likely that they were angry; dangerously so. Imagine killing God's prophet, and serving up his head on a platter, as dinner party entertainment for your guests!

With these tensions simmering in the background Jesus has been performing miracles all day long, healing the sick from all over the region. Herod's killing, he's healing, Herod's oppressing, he's setting people free from sickness and from demon possession. Now Jesus caps it all off with the extraordinary miracle of taking two small fish and five loaves the size

of bread rolls and miraculously breaking them, halving them, again, and again, and again, enough to fill and refill basket after basket, and feed the entire crowd. Every year the Jewish nation celebrated their exodus from slavery in Egypt, God delivering his people from slavery to the Egyptians and then miraculously feeding them in the wilderness with manna, bread from heaven, before leading them to the Promised Land. This is too similar. It's too much for the crowd, their Jewish nationalistic tensions reach boiling point. 'This man is the Messiah, feeding us like God fed us before leading us to battle and taking the Promised Land for ourselves. That Promised Land is now occupied by Romans, wicked tyrants like Herod, it's time for us to unite behind the rightful king of the Jews and take back what is ours!

But it was not time, and this was not the way. John's version of this story records the crowd trying to make Jesus king by force. In our passage today Jesus acts quickly to quell this uprising.

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Jesus sends his disciples ahead in a boat, perhaps in case they got any ideas about being leaders in the rebellion, and then he personally dismisses the crowd. After which, no doubt exhausted and still in need of time to mourn John, Jesus withdraws

to pray. He prays to his Father for six or seven hours, right throughout the night, before setting out to catch up with his disciples somewhere between 3.00am and 6.00am in the morning.

The Sea of Galilee was prone to sudden and quite violent storms and as it happens his disciples had been battling one for most of the night. They would have been exhausted after both a long day with Jesus and then the physical exertion of rowing against the waves, and currents and winds, likely having been blown very far off course. Rowing all night, and tired, they see Jesus walking matter-of-factly to them on the water. They're terrified – people sink, ghosts don't – and in their tired and fearful state that's exactly what they thought they saw until Jesus identified

himself. And then, unique to Matthew's version of this episode, Peter, for some reason blurts out:

28 "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." 29 "Come," he said.

He takes a few steps, then, almost as if the reality of what he is doing sinks in, his faith falters, and he begins to sink. But Jesus is there, catches him, pulls him in the boat, and no less remarkably, see in verse 32, he calms the storm.

Well what are we to make of this dramatic episode? Quite a few things in fact. Firstly, Jesus walks on water and calms another storm – again we see his authority and power over nature. Secondly, Jesus identi-

fies himself literally in the Greek as – ‘I am’ when he says ‘it is I.’ This is God’s name in the Old Testament, ‘I am who I am’. Jesus is explicitly claiming to be God, as he does something only God can do, walk on water and calm storms. This is no doubt why in verse 33 his disciples worship him for the first time. in the bible ‘worship’ is reserved for God and God alone, and as they worship him they say ‘Truly you are the Son of God’, again a first in Matthew’s gospel. Add to all this, and again reaching back into Israel’s history, in addition to feeding his people with bread from heaven, in the exodus out of Egypt God parted the Red Sea, and led the whole Israelite nation, in one sense to walk across the water. So as we can see there are layers and layers of meaning in this high drama on the Sea of Galilee.

Think & Pray

As we move, however, to reflect over this passage for ourselves I think Matthew places his emphasis on the actions of Peter. Take some time now to think about what you think went on in the mind and heart of Peter when he saw Jesus walking towards them. What does this passage teach us about faith? Fixing his eyes on Jesus in faith Peter stepped out into the storm to walk towards his Lord. His faith wavered, but Jesus was there to save him. What might this teach us about the storms that we encounter in life? What might this suggest about the times we feel Jesus is asking us to do the impossible? What do we learn about faith?

Or you might like to spend some time reflecting on faith and doubt in the life of a Christian. The reality of the Christian life is that followers of Jesus regularly experience a combination of faith and doubt, like Peter did today. What lesson is there here for these ups and downs? Jesus encourages Peter to do something extraordinary by faith, then when Peter falters, Jesus asks why he doubted, right after pulling him to safety. What extraordinary thing might Jesus right now be encouraging you to do by faith? How will you respond? Like Peter? Or are you afraid to take that first step of faith? Are you doubting your ability to do what he's asking? Or doubting Jesus' ability to keep you safe as you go out on this limb for him?

To close, please pray in response to the

rich theology of this passage, and in response to some of the questions that it has raised in your own heart.