

An Excellent Faith

Sermon preached at Christ Church, Georgetown
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by Andrew Kryzak

Matthew 14:22-33

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the outstanding temptations for good and faithful Christians, when reflecting on this morning's Gospel lesson, which recounts our Lord's "walking toward [his disciples] on the sea," is to get lost in a speculative cul-de-sac, theorizing about the physics of Jesus' walking across the water. The obviously miraculous, however, should not distract us from the seemingly mundane. Because this story is not about our Lord or the surface tension of the sea, not exclusively. The lesson for us this morning is about St Peter.

One of the reasons why I quite like St Peter is that when there is a chance to do something wrong, Peter almost invariably does it wrong. He is proud, and impulsive, and often failed by his eagerness. Peter always sits in the front row of class and has his hand up first, and half the time, he blurts out the wrong answer. In that way, he is typical of us all, not only as Christians, but also as humans. Given all this, it might seem counterintuitive that Peter should be chief among the apostles, counterintuitive that our Lord should have declared, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." It might seem counterintuitive that someone as flawed and as *human* as Peter should be the most reliable bulwark against the gates of hell, but our Lord's wisdom is not so inscrutable as at first it might seem.¹

When I was in high school, I had a teacher who insisted that his students observe a distinction between *success* and *excellence*. The school's college-preparatory machinery, which was designed to buff its students to a high gloss, was also, this teacher argued, setting up a group of young people to be successful, yes, but also to become brittle and *boring*. Excellence, he said, was the hallmark not of those who had merely done well, who had conscientiously dotted all the I's and crossed all the T's: excellence demanded more. Success, he said, could be largely achieved through avoiding error. But excellence, *excellence* demanded an encounter with failure. This is not to say that he was at all encouraging about the *experience* of failure: Failure, and rejection, and loss, and disappointment, he said, are usually pretty miserable experiences. But he was encouraging about the *effects* of failure.

¹ Matthew 16:18

If this all sounds a bit too much like Outward Bound character building, perhaps you're right. But we find ourselves living daily with the unexpected: a global health crisis, significant economic and political uncertainty, to say nothing of the ordinary setbacks that happen to each of us, in ways large and small, every day of our lives. Often times, the outcomes of those setbacks are beyond our control, for better, and for worse.

And now, in the midst of all of it, we hear this morning's lesson about the disciples, sailing across the sea. Sailing is an activity at which some of them, whose résumés include significant experience as fishermen, have considerable skill at doing. Sailing stormy seas should be within their grasp, but the boat is battered by the waves, and not just battered: the Greek word Matthew uses here (βασανιζόμενον) can be more precisely translated as *tortured*. The boat is *tortured* by the waves, knocked about and buffeted, straining the very limits of what the disciples as sailors can handle.

The background to this episode is an earlier and equally familiar story in the gospel of Matthew, in chapter eight, in which Jesus is *with* the disciples in the boat, and another storm comes up, but he is asleep. The disciples wake him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" After chiding them for their little faith, he stands and rebukes the waves, and the sea and the winds are calm.²

This morning's story, then, may be seen as a commentary on this earlier story told by Matthew. The earlier story is about the revelation of Jesus Christ's power over creation, a property that belongs to God alone, and when they see that power demonstrated, the disciples cannot help but ask themselves, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

So, if the earlier story was all about our Lord and the revelation of his power, this story is about his disciples, about St Peter, about what happens in the morning light, and it is a story, therefore, about all of us.

Because in this morning's story, Jesus is *not* with the disciples in the boat, but they make it to the morning nevertheless. You can imagine the aftermath: everything is wet, and everyone is exhausted. But they did it: they sailed their way through the storm relying exclusively on their own sailing prowess. Even though a strong wind is still blowing, they survived. They did it *on their own*. They succeeded.

And so I think that we can understand St Peter's confidence, his courage even, when he says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." With the Lord's help, he knows

² Matthew 8:23-27

that the seas will obey, that he too will join Jesus on the face of the waters.³ Jesus commands him, and he steps out not into the water, but onto it.

We all know what happens next.

I will not embarrass us all by asking whether you have ever tried to walk on water, so to speak, or whether you believed you did walk on water. I certainly have done both of these things. I don't know about you, but in most of those moments, I have faltered. I have started to sink. And it has usually been embarrassing. And so I think one of the important questions for those of us who follow our Lord, who follow in the footsteps of St Peter is this: could Peter have done otherwise? Could he have *not* noticed the strong wind, and *not* gotten skittish, and *not* lost his nerve, lost sight of Jesus, standing right there in front of him, and *failed*, right there in front of both his Lord and his compatriots? Even on a calm day, with no distractions, would Peter have made it a few more steps? Maybe so... but I think it hardly matters.

Because we who walk by faith do so almost always on heavy seas.

The English clergyman John Newton, the hymn writer of *Amazing Grace*, in his former life was both a slave and a slave trader, and he knew intimately what it was to fail spiritually. In 1758, wrote this:

Our Lord... gives timely warning to his disciples not to expect great things for themselves, but rather to reckon upon it that the moment they enlist under his banner, they will meet opposition on all sides, and must win every inch of their way to his kingdom, by dint of conflict.⁴

There is no such thing as a successful Christian. There is no such thing as a Christian who lives her whole life of faith without a down moment, whose life is an unending sequence of prosperity and health and good cheer. We all have episodes of adversity: some of those episodes are short, some of them are much longer than we would like.

Newton's martial metaphor here is instructive: in some conflicts, we will succeed, and in others, we will fail.

I don't think it's obvious that Peter should have cried out for Jesus, "Lord, save me!" even though he was standing right in front of him. But *even* in the midst of Peter's demonstration of the imperfection of his faith and his conviction, even as the failure of his nerve drags him to the

³ Cf. Genesis 1:2

⁴ John Newton, "Miscellaneous Thoughts and enquiries on an important subject" and containing meditations on scriptural texts, June 26, 1758, MS2937, Lambeth Palace Library.

bottom, he puts his trust in the only place where trust is properly placed: in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In this, even as his faith falters, Peter shows what it is to have an *excellent* faith.

I don't think that we can take for granted that Peter cried out, "Lord, save me!" Because he might have said almost anything else! What would you say if you began to slip beneath stormy seas? I would have probably shouted a plain old, "Help," or I would have cursed my situation in the most colorful language available. But not Peter. For all of his considerable faults, in his greatest distress, he cried out to his Lord, absolutely sure that it was his God who was his ultimate salvation.

That is an *excellent* faith, one which is battle tried and true. And we may have an excellent faith, because we have an excellent Lord. Jesus' death and resurrection is the ultimate demonstration for us that no setback, no failure, not even death itself is the final word in human existence, that in the person of Christ God goes with us even to the darkest places and wins the victory on our behalf.

By faith and the Holy Spirit, Christians are empowered to do all manner of extraordinary things, to withstand storms and temptations and depredations and opposition on all sides, to "do all such good works as [God hath] prepared for us to walk in."⁵ We will do those things imperfectly, and we will fail. But if our lives of faith are lives of prayer, of devotion, of continually turning to Jesus Christ with a cry on our lips of "Lord, save me!" he will be with us. That is his promise, even here, and even now.

Good people of Christ Church, I cannot overstate what a joy it is to be here, and to be with you, for both Hannah and for me. Over the next several months and years, I will be absolutely delighted to come to know each of you as we work together in our shared ministry in this place. These are odd and uncertain times in which we are living, but we walk by faith, faith enough to turn to our Lord Jesus Christ in our fear and confusion, and put our whole trust in him.

Back in 1758, John Newton ended his reflection on the many perils of Christian life with a short prayer. May it be ours as well. Let us pray.

*Speak thou unto my soul, say Be of good cheer, it is I and I am satisfied: I stand upon the side of the ship, ready at thy bidding to walk on thy errand, in defiance of winds and waves; only when the storm runs high, and faith begins to fail, be thou near to stretch out thy right hand to save me, to disperse my tears, and inspire me with new strength.*⁶

AMEN.

⁵ Book of Common Prayer (1979), Postcommunion prayer.

⁶ Newton, "Miscellaneous Thoughts," June 26, 1758.