

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH**  
**SUNDAY 26 JULY 2015**  
**Rev. Anneke Oppewal**  
**2 Kings 4:42-44, Psalm 145, John 6: 1-21**



**“Walking on Water”**

Where I grew up in Holland, it wasn't only the bird bath that would freeze over in winter, as it did in several of your gardens over the last couple of weeks. In winter, in Holland, first puddles would freeze over, then ponds, then the canal, and if it was a really cold winter, the river, the lakes in the northern part of the country, and once, in a really really cold winter, I even remember part of the North Sea freezing over.

Ice forming was always reason for great excitement. The whole country would get their toboggans and skates out and head to ponds, canals, rivers and lakes. Refreshment stands would pop up on the ice everywhere, serving hot chocolate, cake and hot dogs for very little money. Every so many years, the ice would be deemed strong enough for the legendary “Elfstedentocht”, a nearly 200 kilometre long speed-skating race in the north of the country, with thousands trying their mettle.

It always took a couple of days for the ice to become firm enough to support a person, and it would also, after a period of really good ice, take a while for it to completely disappear again. As kids, we would try the strength of the ice before and after it was deemed safe to do so by our parents, and engage in what was called floe jumping. This could be extremely dangerous. One wrong move and you'd end up in the freezing water, and, if you were unlucky enough, underneath the ice that was there without being able to push through it back to the surface. It was an exhilarating sport though, and very tempting.

The trick was to run as fast as possible towards the thinly covered water and keep running until you got to the other side. Feeling the ice give underneath your feet and moving just before you'd start to sink was a powerful experience. One hesitation and there was no way you'd get the next step in. It was like flying, and making it to the other side hale and dry produced an adrenaline rush like few others.

One year, when I was around 10 years old, an older boy from another school drowned in the 2 metre deep pond between the school and the nursing home, with people looking on in horror while he disappeared beneath the ice. No one was able to get him out in time. That taught me more about the biblical fear of what lurks beneath the surface of water than any warnings from adults ever could. I got wet once I think, and only because I missed the last step before getting to shore.

Reflecting this week on the passage we read this morning from the gospel of John, and probably prompted by some of your comments on the frozen bird baths in your gardens last week, I remembered this dangerous pastime and how it probably is the closest I have ever come to walking on water, and how exhilarating it was to be doing it. While pondering ice covered water and floe jumping, I came across Sean Winter's excellent article in Crosslight about the historical Jesus. I realised that it had been a long time since Jesus walking on water, or defying the laws of nature in other ways, had worried me. I realised that what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13: 11: “When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways” is true for me when it comes to the historical Jesus. The way I see Jesus now is very different from the way I did when I was in Sunday school. Over the years, my thinking about Jesus has changed and developed beyond recognition, and is still developing and changing even now.

As a Sunday school aged child, I accepted, without doubt or hesitation, that Jesus could walk on water, as easily and as comfortably as if it was covered in a couple of weeks worth of solid ice. As a teenager, and when I first started studying theology, I lost that first, simple acceptance, and became convinced it was all

legend and myth. Tall stories made up by over-excited early Christians who hadn't quite understood what Jesus was all about. Simple, superstitious fishermen who made him god, while he was no more than an extraordinary teacher. What came to us in the gospels was like Chinese whispers that had changed an ordinary Jewish carpenter into some divine being he never was.

For a while, I believed passionately in the exceptional rabbi version of Jesus, a teacher so special that stories about his exceptional gifts had multiplied and grown like mushrooms in warm wet autumn weather, but who was, in the end, no more than a man of extraordinary charisma and teaching skill.

Somewhere along the way, I also met the mystical Jesus of prayer, Jesus the Jew, Jesus the first Christian, Jesus the prophet, Jesus the divine oracle, Jesus the social justice activist, the Jesus of the poor, Jesus the healer, and many other versions of whatever beliefs there are about him.

In between all the clamour, the voice of faith somehow persisted, asking me, like Jesus asks of Peter in all of the three synoptic gospels. (Mark 8:29, Matthew 16:15, Luke 9:20):  
"Who do you say I am?"

Before you get excited, I still haven't found a definitive answer to that for me, let alone for you. But I have gained some valuable insights along the way.

The Jesus of faith is, for me, a living, breathing, reality. He walks with me. And, more often than not, I can hear his voice. I may lose touch for a while, and have lost touch for longer or shorter stretches of time, but somehow Jesus always returns as a living presence in my life. And what's come through from whatever the historical reality was, into what the gospels tell us about the Jesus who had such an impact on Jew and gentile alike, I am happy to accept as guidance for my life.

But, reading the stories that were on the lectionary for this morning, I realised that that connection, and what I understand of what that guidance is, has changed considerably over the years. It has grown and matured, we have grown and matured, Jesus and me together, in a process of trial and error, discovery and transformation, question, doubt, understanding and insight. And the prospect of more growing and more maturing to be done fills me with excited anticipation.

I don't think Jesus was a miraculously good floe jumper who could get to the other side even without thin sheets of ice supporting him underfoot. Neither do I believe that Jesus could conjure up food for 5000 from little more than thin air.

Immersing myself in the scriptures over the years has taught me that there is more to what the gospels tell us about Jesus than magic or the teaching of a handful of deep truths.

What difference would magic have made anyway? As interesting as someone feeding 5000 people from 5 loaves and 2 fishes two thousand years ago could be, it doesn't change all that much to your reality and my reality here and now. It would not change our life or that of millions of starving people on our planet today in any significant way. And the same applies to a guy being able to walk on water. Even IF it was historically accurate in our present day sense, it would not be more than an interesting bit of trivia. I've heard stories about monks in Tibet walking on water, and, apart from filling me with mild amazement about the stories people come up with, it doesn't really change anything much in my life if they could.

Of course, it would be interesting if someone could find a way to defy gravity, but until that actually means that we can get out of the traffic jam before the Westgate bridge on a Friday afternoon and just walk across to the other side, it won't impact on my life that much on a daily basis. Jesus, however, after 2000 years, still does. He still impacts on my life, informs, guides, heals, comforts, supports and shapes what I do and who I am.

Why? Because there is more there than just magic. There is a depth and breadth there that connects me, through him, to the essence of life, to the ground of all being, to energy and dreams that have the capacity

to change the world. Because in him, where the gospels talk about him, heaven and earth come together, past and future become one reality, we discover where God comes close, and where God's way of love and light takes shape.

The stories we read this morning are more than accounts of what happened then, more than a report on miraculous and strange things that may or may not have happened all that time ago. Looking closely, we discover that both the stories are riddled with references to other parts of scriptures. They have been shaped with intention and deliberation.

There is not a word, not an image, not a dot point or comma in them that hasn't been thought through and that doesn't, in one way or another, connect us to something else. Together, they link us to reality much broader and wider, deeper and higher than we might first realise. The reality of the divine at work in the world is at every turn, especially in the gospel of John, but also in the other gospels.

A whole world we might miss because it lies hidden underneath centuries of familiarity with the surface of the stories, their deeper and hidden meanings, and referencing of other parts of scripture obscured by translations, lack of experience with the wider scriptures, our ignorance of the culture and spirituality of the time, and the obscurity of some of the references hidden in the text.

Just as a lot of teenagers nowadays don't get the references to Christianity and the Bible when they read literature, what we get when we read the Bible in translation, without extensive notes about the background and context, is only a very small part of the story. And even with notes, there is still a lot that has been lost over the last two thousand years.

For instance: The Greek words that John uses to tell us the story of the feeding of the 5000 connect the story unequivocally to the Eucharist and the story of the last supper. Except that the story of the last supper is not found in John. In effect, John moves the last supper to the middle of the gospel, to be followed by the story of Jesus walking on water, a part of the story that is riddled with references to the Exodus, Joshua and the people of Israel crossing the river Jordan to the land of promise, and Pesach. All, in the Jewish mind, connected to new life, resurrection, and a death-defying journey to "the other side". John plays with that concept of "the other side" in more ways than one. Not only is there clear reference to the Exodus and the crossing of the river Jordan into the promised land, there are also links to the beginning of creation in Genesis 1 and Paradise with the tree of life at its centre. For good measure, John adds in: "It was close to Pesach, the festival of the Jews", taking us, should we have missed the abundance of other connections, to Easter. Liberation, the parting of the sea, the land of promise on the other side, the new beginnings, Moses, Joshua, manna in the desert, the giving of the law, and a whole host of other stories are skilfully and subtly moved into view. Increasing the tension and expectations of his audience until they exclaim, with a quote from Deuteronomy 18, referring to Moses, "this is the prophet who will come"!

But no, there is more than Moses here, and in these two central stories that are at the heart of the gospel, John makes that clear by connecting to the past and foreshadowing the future in and through the way he shapes his story.

There is reference to the meal on the mountain of the Lord at the end of time, as we find it in Isaiah 25 as well as Revelations 22. There is the giving of the law on the mountain in Exodus 24, and reference to the eschatological tree of life planted "on the other side" from the book of Daniel that will be bearing fruit. In the Greek, we hear echoes of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters at the beginning of creation, bringing order to chaos, connecting Jesus ambling across that same watery chaos to the other side to the beginnings of a new creation.

Without going into too much detail about Greek words and references to the rest of the scriptures (you'll have to take my word for it), once you start to listen to the story in this way, it becomes an echo chamber of intricate reference and word play, connecting backwards and forward to multiple aspects of God's journey with us, his people.

Jesus, his journey and what is to happen to him in the space of these two stories, is at the heart of the gospel, put into the much larger context and perspective of God's journey with his people from the beginning. John, through the way he tells the story, tells us that in Jesus, everything that has been happening and will be happening converges, comes together, comes into focus like never before.

Taking old stories up to the next level, where what and who God is, becomes a more tangible reality. This man Jesus, John tells us, came and showed us God at work in the world in all its breath taking depth. In his presentation of Jesus, John shows the old stories exploding into new levels of life-giving, God-given presence.

Bread is shared on green pastures and the powers of death subdued, the Exodus is taken to the next level, surpassing Moses, Joshua and others with extraordinary gifts and graces from God. Bringing us back, and moving us forward, if we can only hear through the layers of centuries, to paradise and the tree of life, planted on the other side of the sea of death, bearing fruit that nurtures as it is found in Ezekiel 47:12 and Revelation 22:2. Inviting all the nations to the mountain of the Lord, to a place of verdant pastures as we find them in Psalm 23, among others, walking across the water as the saving God is portrayed doing in Psalm 77, hovering over the chaos like the Spirit of God at the beginning.

Who is Jesus? I'd like to look into that with you a bit more in the next couple of weeks, when I will take you through the "I am" sayings in the gospel of John. But for now?

For John, and for many others like him, Jesus is a point in time where all that God is and works for in the world is snapped into focus, a presence at the heart of a web-connecting past, present and future. A place where the God-given rivers of light, love and life are running through our history from the beginning of time, pooled together for a moment, to branch out again into the future. Amen.