

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 7 AUGUST 2011

Rev. Deacon Jenny Preston

Matthew 14: 22-33

“Sharing the Bread of the Voyage”

Once upon a time I was so brave or fearless, that I would jump off the top tower at the Creswick swimming pool. Now when I go swimming with my grand-children, I actually panic at the thought of ducking under the swimming lines! I'm trying to overcome that fear – for my sake and their's. When I was thinking of tackling theological education, I went along to the Council of Adult Education. They were most encouraging. I still wasn't sure, “no, I couldn't do that”. and my dear husband said, “we'll both go, will that help?”. He made himself vulnerable, took a big step, a big risk, to encourage me, to walk with me. And I get different fears, doubts and anxieties now!

We have many individuals fears – and community fears too: it seems we tend to worry more about our hip pocket over the carbon tax, than worrying about the future we are leaving for our grandchildren. We are fearful about people who are different, who we've not had the opportunity to get to know: particularly we make demons of asylum seekers, probably they are all terrorists. some of us don't read or watch the news, feeling helpless and threatened about the tragedies taking place within our world. I visited the Ivanhoe UCAF this week: the members told me that they were all fearful of ageing, so they decided to spend a meeting sharing their fears and ways they could help each other to walk confidently ahead.

Today we have another Peter story. We know from the Gospels that Peter was always prone to precipitate the action; I think we can identify with Peter, he tries so hard, yet stumbles occasionally like us. .We may wonder why Matthew is the only gospel to record Jesus walking on the water. We also wonder about the miracle, which we can't ignore, although not many of us will feel able to take the story literally. And certainly we should not be distracted from the symbolism of the story ---

Storms are a feature of both the Old and New Testament: the formless void in Genesis 1, the story of Noah, in the Psalms, in Jonah, and in the gospels of Mark and John also. The sea is traditionally the source of deep and threatening powers, of dragons, the abyss. And brings images of the chaos of the created world, of disharmony, and disorder. Perhaps the community for which Matthew was writing was feeling persecuted, and isolated, among the multi-racial population of Palestine. There would be issues of social, religious & political powers. Matthew knew, as Jesus knew, as we know, that human beings face chaos, storms throughout their lives. So we can identify with Peter quite easily.

The scene is set: it is evening and Jesus is alone. He's sent the disciples off in their boat. And it seems they were being blown by strong winds, far from land, for many hours. There's a gap of around 6-8 hours before the very next verse – the New Revised Version says: and early in the morning he came walking towards them on the sea. In the Greek, it says, ‘in the fourth watch’ – which tells us that it is around 3am to 6 am – it seems the boat has been at the mercy of the winds for many hours. Maybe they were scared of drowning, or of the creatures in the deep, they had no life-rescue boats or radio-telephones. Feeling quite alone. The text says: they were terrified. Jesus responds to their fear: It is I; trust me.

We have some idea of what it's like at that time in the night - when we might be peering into the abyss, when we may be feeling a clump in the pit of our stomach or a squeeze of our chest, when

some life-events are buffeting us. When our whole being is churning. Peter says, "If it is really you, Lord, command me to come to you." - And he hears an answering "come". Not really sure, yet sure enough to step out, Peter steps into the murky, dark night. The water holds, but Peter gets the collywobbles – he feels the strong wind, the forces against him, and he cries out: Lord, save me. Jesus reaches out his hand.

David Ewart suggests that Jesus' comment and question to Peter "You of little faith, why did you doubt", would be better translated as "You of little trust, why did you hold back?", that the issue is not intellectual faith or belief, but that the issue is loyalty/trust, and not getting distracted in times of trouble and testing. That sounds fine here together in worship, a place of safety and prayer. But there are times when our fears will be more than we are capable of bearing alone, times when we feel the lack of the presence of God. We do need to be reminded, again and again, that the kind of God we have loves us in and out of the boat of life, when we are swizzling around in panic, when we may have been called upon to leave the safety of the boat for a situation not of our choosing.

The early church fathers have interpreted this story in various ways: and suggested that their community must be on the watch for the 'fourth watch of the night' --- when Jesus will return, after the winds of trials and tribulations, another suggests that the boat being buffeted is the Church itself..... that the church is being rocked and shaken amid the storms of time, and he urged believers to stay in the boat. We could say that there are many today who would prefer to sit passively, or even fearfully, in the bow or stern of the church, wondering if the church has a future! sometimes we won't move out of the boat – and have not the courage of Peter, or William Wilburforce, Rosa Parks or Archbishop Tutu. However Peter wasn't in the boat alone, and neither are we.

We come to these fearful periods of our life – individually , perhaps we may be re-trenched, one of our children decides to leave their partner and children; or our beloved spouse dies. and here we are, a whole new life we didn't ask for. The gospel reading says: - when Peter began to panic, Jesus immediately reached out his hand.

Sometimes, it feels like there is no hand to grasp, that God is absent. I want to share a faith story with you, I have permission to do so. A member of our congregation has been receiving care while her bones are doing the slow job of knitting over a crack. It's been quite a few weeks. And she has felt close to us through visits and phone calls.

She had such a lot to share with me this week! "Jenny, my world has been opened; I must tell you what has been happening. I had no idea."

"There's a wee couple from the Indian sub-continent; they are both working here as care assistants; their children are back in their own country with Grandma. They keep working, saving money to send home. and on weekends they sit in their flat, trying to find things to do and say to each other, fearful of the unknown. I told them they must think about going out into marvelous Melbourne, they are so young and need to see and feel people enjoying life around them. Jenny, this week the wife came in and thanked me from the bottom of her dear heart – her husband took her to the closest snow field, and she feels full of life and so relaxed." "and that's not all -- there's another lass I'm helping to read the jobs vacant and encouraging her, and another lady has opened up the world of justice and refugees to me".

In her time of patient waiting, with the wisdom she has gained over many years, she has been the avenue of liberation for some of God's little people. She has been the hand that reached out; she has seen the lady struggling and reached out her hand to save her, she has been the hand of Jesus

saving this couple from drowning in sorrow. The amazing thing is – both parties have received more blessing than they ever expected!

John Wesley talks about God coming to us before we have any inkling of being called; Wesley calls it 'Prevenient Grace'. It is the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. Our opening prayer, and in our last hymn, there is the phrase: Companion God, - -- a good way of delving into that image is to think of the two parts of the word: Latin cum – meaning 'together with', and the French word 'panis' meaning bread. In our fears, or another's fears or doubts we are called on to be companions. We are called, in and out of boats, sinking, or holding another up, to share the sour and the sweet dough of life's journey. Any one of us can be Jesus gently saying: take heart, it is I. Amen.