

RESPONDING TO THE CALL OF GOD IN TURBULENT TIMES

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 9 August, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Dawn Robson

Pentecost 10A

Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28; Romans 10: 5-15; Matthew 14: 22-33

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Whenever I hear this gospel story being read, my thoughts go back to 1969 when I was teaching Scripture to the infants class at the Warren public school. I told the story of Jesus walking on the water to his disciples who were in a boat during a storm, and when I'd finished a 6-year old boy, Murray, said "*I don't believe that story*". I was taken aback as I had not expected this response from a 6-year old, especially one who is a regular attender at our Sunday School.

I expect that countless adults might have responded as Murray did. However, it's easy to limit this passage to Jesus' actions on the water, and so miss out on other interesting and helpful parts of the story. I have enjoyed exploring this gospel passage and would like to share some of my learnings with you.

Throughout the centuries, Christians have grappled with the concept of Jesus being both human and divine. As we read through the gospels, it is easy to see the humanness of Jesus. He identified with the poor, suffering and sick folk that he encountered day by day. He even cried when told of his friend Lazarus' death. But how do we understand his divinity?

The writer of Matthew's gospel was keen to portray both the humanity and divinity of Jesus, and this is clear in the story of Jesus walking on the water. Here Matthew shows Jesus' divine power and presence. Jesus crosses the boundaries between the human and the divine, between earth and heaven. Matthew shows, further, that these same powers that Jesus demonstrates here are also available to other humans, first of all to Peter and the other disciples.

Matthew wrote his gospel at a time when Jesus' followers were being pushed out of the synagogues and so were losing touch with their Jewish faith, their family and friends. They were ostracised from folk who had been their faith family for years. This was a time of turmoil and persecution for them as they tried to develop a separate identity.

Scholars agree that the boat can be seen as a symbol of the early Christian community in a world of chaos, threat and risk. In order to survive the difficult times, the followers needed to keep focused on Jesus, who could support and guide them.

In the Bible the sea represents chaos. This was a deeply-held notion of the Jews as well as other peoples, because the sea represents what cannot be controlled.

The disciples were feeling at sea because of the circumstances of their being pushed out of the synagogues, and so therefore they wanted to cling to Jesus. This chaos is also represented by darkness, and it is in that very darkness, in the middle of the night, that Jesus comes to them. He does what only God can do and speaks with the voice of God.

Peter, in his enthusiastic way, shows great personal faith by leaving the boat, but in the violence of the storm he takes his eyes off Jesus and begins to sink. He cries out “*Lord save me*”.

These 3 words are a prayer which has echoed amongst Jesus’ followers throughout the centuries. Jesus stretches out his hand and Peter is calmed and saved. In case you feel sorry for Peter being accused of “little faith”. Apparently this is not a derogatory term, but shows a mixture of courage and anxiety, of hearing the word of the Lord and looking at the terror of the storm. The disciples then acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God and worship him.

The scholar Eugene Boring says: “*Matthew’s desire is to encourage readers to identify themselves and their troubles with the beleaguered disciples in the boat; to sense in the approaching presence of Jesus, the goodness and greatness of God; to focus, not as Peter did on the hardships that surround them, but on the One who summons them to trust and come to him; and to acknowledge and worship Jesus as God’s son.*”

This week, I’ve been reading a newly-published book, *God and the Pandemic*, by the British New Testament scholar Tom Wright. He gives some insights into how the early Christian communities lived out their faith in difficult times. From the very start, the early Christians looked out at this world, as Jesus had looked out upon his beloved people. They saw what God was wanting them to do and say, and so prayerfully got on with it themselves.

In the year 260, when a plague struck their part of the world, a quarter of the population died. The well-to-do people ran to the hills, whereas the Christians stayed. They nursed the sick, attending to their every need and ministered to them in Christ. Many of them caught the disease themselves and died. No wonder the Gospel spread - even when the Romans were doing their best to stamp it out. Over the next 16 centuries, through plagues that wiped out 60% of Europe’s population, historians credit the caring actions of Christians with not only saving countless lives, but with promoting the growth of the Christian faith.

Tom Wright likens this to the response of some people in the UK to the Covid-19 Pandemic this year. The government asked for volunteers to help the National Health Service with all the extra urgent non-specialist tasks. Half a million people signed up almost at once. Retired doctors and nurses came back into the front line. Some themselves caught the virus and died.

In Australia recently, large parts of NSW experienced the terror of bush fires. Good, brave, folk responded immediately, putting their lives in danger to save the lives of other people, animals and property. The call of God went out, and those with faith, and those without faith, answered that call.

Jesus stands in the midst of life, in the deep water and calls us. As we respond to the call we may face turbulent times. At times we may be unsure of our direction, but we move forward knowing that it is what we are called to do, and God is with us. We move from our comfort zones to those who are outside the fellowship of our church community, to share and live out the good news of the gospel.

I have been thinking about my involvement in the Pitt St congregation over 30 years, and trying to remember a time when I felt like Peter. The Pitt St congregation in the 80s and 90s joined the Community Refugee Settlement Scheme, as we believed God was calling us into this ministry. We were allocated a family each 6 months and were asked to care for and support them as they adjusted to life in Sydney.

A small group of us would carry out many tasks, including finding accommodation for each family, registering them at government agencies, enrolling children at school and the adults for English lessons, and many other tasks. Some of the countries our refugees came from were El Salvador, Vietnam, Bosnia, Somalia & Ethiopia.

We visited these families at least once each week. Having to enter into the grief of these folk who were dependent on us was really hard. They grieved the family members they had left behind in their country of birth. They felt overwhelmed by their circumstances, confused because of little or no English language skills, fearful of what each new day would bring.

As we tried to support and encourage these dear folk, at times our response was to cry out like Peter: *“Lord save us”*. Yet, the word came to us *“I have called you into this ministry, and I will support you as you care for these my refugee children. Trust me.”*

And we did. Times of great happiness and joy followed as these dear folk learned to stand on their own two feet. We were sad when Phillip Ruddock closed down the scheme, and handed it over to businesses that were paid to do what we had done for free.

Quoting Geoffrey Plant, *“When we are fearful and overwhelmed by the waves, where do we place our faith? In the power of the mighty storm, or in the one who even the wind and sea obey? Such faith does not mean certainty; it means the courage to live with uncertainty.”* In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *“such a faith does not mean having the answers, it means having the courage to ask the questions and not let go of God, as he does not let go of us”*.

Now back to 1969, and little Murray Turrell. I don't remember what I said to him or to the class that day. If I was in that situation today I would say: *Murray, I don't know if Jesus actually walked on the water or not, but I do know that the disciples believed he did and that's why this story is in the Bible.*

What I do know is that Jesus loved his followers very much and he was concerned that they were so frightened by the storm and the waves. He went to them. He calmed the storm, and taught Peter and the others that he was always with them, even when they couldn't see him.

They could trust him to help them through difficult times.

Jesus is always with us too, you and me.

We can depend on Jesus to help us all the time.