

Holy Covenant, Jamieson  
Pentecost 13, 10 August 2008  
Genesis 37.1-4, 12-28  
Matthew 14.22-36

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### Walking on water



It is an honour to be invited to participate in your 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. This morning, picking up the theme of your festival, I want to attempt something a little outside the square! I want to honour this place in the liturgy as the place for listening for a Word of God – listening with the texts we have just heard from the Hebrew Scriptures and from the Gospel of Matthew. I also want to introduce you (though this may not be your first encounter) to the rich world of orthodox icons. These two activities, preaching and icons, are not as unrelated as they might sound. If you were to enter an orthodox church on any particular Sunday you might see, in addition to the icons already surrounding you on the walls and ceiling, an icon relating to the particular feast day or liturgical cycle placed centrally in the space. Not only do you hear the Word of God, but you see it also. (Your pearl of great price – is your seasonal icon here...)

In bringing a small gift of icons to you today I need to say that my intention is not about *illustrating* the Scriptures. In the orthodox tradition icons are considered to be revelatory, sacramental in a parallel way to the Scriptures. As the Ecumenical Council of 869-70 declared: “What the Gospel proclaims to us by words, the icon also proclaims and renders present for us by colours.” So I hope that today we will both hear and see God’s Word for us today – first with our outwards senses, but more importantly with the ears and eyes of our hearts, our inward senses.

We need to come to the icon tradition with a different mindset. In Western art we have highly valued imagination and innovation in creative expression, and honoured individual artists. By contrast, in the Byzantine icon tradition there are rules and traditions of practice which allow us to read a whole language of imagery and colours in a much more stable way. We rarely know the name of the painter or the maker of a mosaic. Indeed Iconographers talk about writing icons rather than painting them. The work of writing an icon is begun in prayer and its hope (audacious perhaps) is to open the heavens – to be for us a window on the Divine.

As you would imagine this tradition, and its claim to sacramentality, has not been without controversy historically. There have been periods of iconoclasm, the destruction of icons, followed by their defence and re-instatement. Our own Protestant history, particularly the Puritan phases, has been nervous about images of any sort. But the place of icons has been affirmed by undivided church. The 7<sup>th</sup> ecumenical council of Nicea, held in 787, linked icons to the incarnation:

Icons are in colours what the Scriptures are in words: witnesses to the Incarnation, the fact that God has come among us as a person whom we can see, touch and hear, to offer us new life and begin the new creation.

Well, that's all we can really afford by way of introduction today. The icon that has been before us is one of the earliest surviving icons – from 6<sup>th</sup> century, it is preserved in St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai. Its composition - known as Christ Pantocrator – the Lord of All –is the most common type of icon of Jesus. It shows him holding a Gospel Book and with his right hand held in what has become the sign of blessing. I now just want to put an icon before you as we turn to our scriptural texts.



This is a 14<sup>th</sup> century fresco from the Monastery of the Holy Saviour in the Fields, Constantinople. The type of icon is known as the Anastasis or the Descent of Christ into Hell. It is one of the two common types of resurrection icons in the Orthodox tradition. In it you can see the Resurrected Christ standing over the pit of hell. The figure of Hades is chained up and Jesus is pulling Adam and Eve from their graves. I'm not going to give you a detailed exegesis of the icon, but rather want to "read our two texts, from Genesis and from the Gospel of Matthew in the *presence* of this icon.

Our story from the book of Genesis begins: "This is the story of the family of Jacob". Such an innocent beginning. Such a human tale (which is a relief really since all families are complex...). After all of Jacob's journeying with God you'd like to hope for more. But Jacob plays favourites, and his youngest son Joseph basks in it. Joseph never has to empty the dishwasher or put out the garbage. He hangs around the house wearing his fancy long robe with sleeves. When he did roll up those sleeves one time to help his brothers in the pasturing business he came back with tales, tales of bad behaviour. And Jacob listened. Jacob listened to Joseph and fed the hatred of his other children. You can feel, can't you, the pit that we meet later in the story already being dug right here – by the whole family dynamic. When Jacob sends Joseph out to find his brothers it's hardly a wise move. It's too late to transform Joseph into a shepherd: Joseph wanders around the fields like a useless idiot until someone points him in the right direction. And why would his brothers greet him with joy – what tale will Joseph spin to his father this time?

The pit is dug, the brothers deepen it. We listen with horror to their plotting – first to kill Joseph and hide his body in a hole (a disused cistern, a pit), then to simply throw him into the pit and leave him

to starve, and finally, the neatest solution of all, to sell him to some traders as a slave. Throughout the text there is a concern with hands. Don't kill him, the eldest brother Reuben says, "lay no hand on him". We don't want our brother's blood on our hands. They are such literalists! But we know for sure, that their terrible betrayal of Joseph is equally the work of their hands. They have lifted Joseph from a literal pit and have thrown him into the pit of slavery. It is a dark day indeed. The work of human hands.

Looking at our icon, you might see this story as a descent into hell. Joseph, his brothers, his father Jacob all descend deeper and deeper into darkness, a living hell, as the story proceeds. This is a story of evil, rooted in human hearts, spiralling out of control.

The story doesn't end here of course, and I will leave its particular resolution to your next preacher. But today's gospel responds powerfully to the darkness of this all too human story, offering us the hope of God's hand...

The Gospel begins not with the darkness of human relations, but with fear and alienation. It is night and the disciples are separated from Jesus. Jesus has compelled them to cross the lake ahead of him, but their boat is battered by waves and thrown off course. The wind is against them. This is story that is so beautifully full of symbol and metaphor. The "sea" or deep, wild water is always a sign of trouble. As one commentator (William Loader) has said: "Semitic culture was not a great surf culture!" Rather the sea is a source of threat, or impending chaos. So when Jesus walks on the water he is signalling authority over the powers that threaten to overwhelm us. He is, we might say, trampling down the gates of hell.

We know too that the boat has come to represent the church, here endangered by the storms of adversity. Well might we pray with Breton fishermen: "Dear God, be good to me. The sea is so wide, and my boat is so small..." It is probably a good thing for us as a church to remember that we are not the first to be battered by waves, and not the first to experience adverse winds.

But if the boat represents the church, so does Peter. Peter, the rock. I have grown to love Peter more and more over the years, because he is so human, so like us. He gives me permission to fail, and to pick myself up again. Again and again. There is a wonderful wooden sculpture of Peter in Melbourne (at St Peter's Eastern Hills) which has a rooster clinging to his feet. The rooster symbolises Peter's failure as a disciple of Jesus – when Jesus was arrested and the disciples were hovering around the courthouse Peter denied ever knowing him – when a rooster crows Peter wakes up to himself and weeps bitterly. Jesus had predicted this betrayal. I like that in the sculpture the rooster is still there, still part of Peter's story – reminding us that we all have our roosters, telling us "learn to love your rooster!" Today's Gospel plays out Peter's rooster story in a different, though parallel way. And it is our story too. Like Peter, we recognise the Divine call, the invitation to walk with Jesus in the same power over all that threatens to overwhelm and defeat us. We step out full of bravado. We are walking, we are walking on water! Then the wind gusts up again, blows in our faces. We feel its strength, we know its familiar shape. We feel the fear again. We can no longer see Jesus. We begin to sink...But, thankfully, our rooster-loving friend knows what to do: call out!

St Augustine expresses this vividly:

Think...of this world as a sea, whipped up to tempestuous heights by violent winds. A person's own private tempest will be his or her unruly desires. If you love God you will have power to walk upon the waters, and all the world's swell and turmoil will remain beneath your feet. But if you love the world it will surely engulf you, for it always devours its lovers, never sustains them. If you feel your foot slipping beneath you, if you become a prey to doubt or realize that you are losing control, if in a word, you begin to sink, say; Lord, I am drowning, save me! Only he who for your sake died in your fallen nature can save you from the death inherent in that fallen nature.

(quoted in Edith Barnecut (ed), *Journey with the Fathers, Year A*)

Lord, I am drowning, save me!

Jesus immediately stretches out his hand and catches us, holds us securely, saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Why do we doubt? Why have we little faith? Well, I've got my own extensive list of possibilities. You are welcome to add your own!

We doubt, because we keep on forgetting that God is *for* us. I don't trust God's hand, any hand.

I am experienced at digging pits and falling into them. My hands have failed both me and others. Others' hands have hurt.

The pit is my destiny. I know its contours, it is familiar, I am attached to it.

I don't actually know how to walk on water and I imagine that I should (by now).

I'm embarrassed by my stumbling attempts, so wonder if I should ever have risked stepping out.

The list goes on

I doubt, because I forget about Jesus, I forget who he is ...I forget who God is.

When the disciples see Jesus walking on the water they cry out with fear. Jesus speaks to them: "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid." Or to use the more resonant translation of the Greek, "Take heart, I am... do not be afraid". The Jesus revealed here is not a phantom, but the Christ, the icon, the mirror or revealer of God. "Take heart, It is I" – the Jesus you we been travelling with, the healer, the teacher, the friend. "Take heart, I am" – the Jesus who we dare to name as Divine, as Son of God. (In our icon Christ's divinity is signalled by the white clothing of resurrection and by the almond shaped mandorla surrounding him. His humanity, and humility, is signalled by his bare feet – walking with us.)

The encounter between Jesus and the disciples in the boat resonates with the resurrection stories. Jesus appears "early in the morning", in the same pre-dawn time as the first Resurrection appearance. Jesus' walking on water is not a party trick! It is a revelation about our destiny, about "the hope that has been placed within us". It is because Jesus walked to the depths of human existence, to and beyond death, that we can take his word to us seriously. We can take heart because as Augustine said "... he [*only* he] who for your sake died in your fallen nature can save you

from the death inherent in that fallen nature.” Jesus descends with us, into the pit, into the chaos, into hell, in search of us.

This is what the icon of Christ’s Descent into Hell recognises and celebrates. A sermon for Holy Saturday written in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century by a Cyprian Bishop, Epiphanius of Salamis, expresses this beautifully (let me read an extract while you ponder the icon again):

Something strange is happening – there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God has died in the flesh and hell trembles with fear.

He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he had gone to free from sorrows the captives Adam and Eve, he who is both God and the son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing a cross, the weapon that had won him the victory. At the sight of him, Adam, the first man he had created, struck his breast in terror and cried out to everyone: “My Lord be with you all.” Christ answered him: “And with your spirit”. He took him by the hand and raised him up, saying: “Awake O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.”

I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and your descendents I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake.

Lord, I am drowning, save me!

Awake, O sleeper, rise from the dead.

Come, walk on the water with me.



The final icon I wish to share with you has been special to me for some time. This is Christ and Abbot Mena – a 6<sup>th</sup> century Coptic icon that is now in an extraordinarily prayerful space in the bottom of the Louvre in Paris. In the language of today's Gospel this icon shows us how to walk on water. You can see Christ holding the Gospel, as he does in the image we saw earlier. But here Jesus has his arm around Abbot Mena and his hand on his shoulder – such gentle, yet sure encouragement – as Abba Mena hold *his* right hand in blessings. Our call is the same, to bless as Christ blesses. To be his hands, his blessing hands in this storm filled world.

But not alone! In partnership – with, through, in the One who loves us. I invite you to be with this icon as I finish with the words of Epiphanius:

I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.