

**TJW, HT, 19.7.09, 9.15am & 11am,**

**Matthew 14.22-36**

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Did you see the news story this week about a British student called Jamie Neale, who was rescued after being lost in the Blue Mountains in Australia for 12 days? His Dad had given up hope of seeing him alive again. And he had a great quote. He said: “I’m going to kick his backside. He’s the only teenager in the world who goes for a walk without his mobile phone. I’d kill him, except that would defeat the point of him being found alive.”

But he also spoke about his son’s despair every time he saw the search helicopter fly overhead and fail to locate him. “Jamie was kind of losing faith in the idea that there was a God every time that helicopter flew over and he waved and shouted and nothing happened”.

The circumstances he was in were making his faith falter.

Not many of us have been lost in the mountains for 12 days - but many of you do know what it’s like to feel that your faith is failing because of the circumstances you’re in.

And that’s exactly what happened to the disciple of Jesus called Peter, in the event we’ve heard read from the Bible.

And because Peter has been in our situation, God’s going to teach us about ourselves through this story about Peter.

Jesus is miraculously walking on water - walking over a lake that five miles wide, where a strong wind has blown up. He’s walking towards a boat in which his disciples are trying to row across the lake

- except they’re hardly getting anywhere, because the wind is strong, and it’s against them.

Right through the New Testament you find that Peter is the bold, impetuous one. He says to Jesus: “Tell me to come out to you, on the water.”

Jesus says, “Come.” And Peter finds that Jesus has given him the ability to walk over the water. And it’s going fine until he suddenly looks away from Jesus - instead he notices how strong the wind is, and he starts to sink.

Here is a faith which does not look like it’s going to survive. Here is a man who is sinking. But we’ve got this event written down for us in the Bible to teach us how to have a certain faith which will survive the crises and the storms and the strong winds which blow through our lives. Here’s where to go when you feel like you’re sinking under the weight of whatever is dragging you down.

And the good news is that it doesn’t start with us having to summon up strong faith out of nowhere, like someone whistling to keep their spirits up when actually they’re just terrified.

The good news is that it doesn’t start with something we’ve got to do. It starts with Jesus. This event puts right in front of our noses a Jesus who is **a mighty Lord, who saves.**

It shows us this Jesus in different ways. First, it shows us Jesus’ nature - he is God.

That’s what his walking on the water is all about.

It’s not just some trick. In the context of the whole Bible, it’s a clear demonstration that Jesus is himself God.

Listen to this from the Old Testament, from the book of Job: “God alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea” (Job 9.8).

And this from Psalm 77: “God, your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen.”

The only one who can do whatever he wants with the sea - because he made it - is God.

The big climax of this story in Matthew is in verse 33, when the disciples say to Jesus: “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Jesus is showing them that being the Son of God means that he is also God himself. God the Son is just as much God as God the Father is.

This also demonstrates Jesus’ power: he’s truly in control - he’s sovereign - he’s Lord.

See how it begins in verse 22 [READ]. Who is responsible for the disciples struggling out there in this big lake, buffeted around by these strong winds? Is it their only silly fault for not listening to the shipping forecast on Radio 4 before they set out?

No. Jesus sent them there - he sent them into it.

And did you notice what happened when he finally climbed into the boat with them, in verse 32? [READ].

Already in Matthew’s Gospel he’s calmed one storm by speaking to it - and it looks as if here does the same thing again here.

Jesus is sovereign over everything that buffets us around in life - everything that seems designed to knock us off course.

He is mighty enough to send us into the storms - and mighty enough to be able to come to us right in the middle of them.

In recent times I have heard different members of this church family speak about their strong sense of Jesus’ presence with them right in the midst of circumstances like these - right in the midst of suddenly being widowed - in the midst of a marriage break-up - in the midst of mental illness.

Jesus is still truly in control - still sovereign enough to keep coming to us in the midst of whatever he sends us into.

He is a mighty, saving Lord.

And God shows us that in other ways, too, here: he shares his power. I couldn’t think of a better way to say it, but here’s what I mean - look at verse 28 [READ verses 28-29].

My young son is just learning to swim. We were on holiday last week, and in the swimming-pool, where we were staying, the only way that he could get from one side to the other was to call me over, and hold my hands, while he kicked his legs and I pulled him across - (and then back again - and again and again). Next time we’ll take a float, so I don’t have to be the float.

The only way Peter walked on the water was at Jesus’ command - when Jesus said to him: “Come.” Then Peter had God’s permission and God’s power to walk miraculously towards Christ.

The only way we come closer to Jesus Christ is by his power in us - at work in us - drawing us in.

Everyone but everyone who becomes a committed Christian knows that it wasn't that they decided to get religion.

It was that they began to open their mind and their heart to Jesus Christ - and found that he was powerful enough to bring them right into a relationship with him.

We had a hire car on holiday, last week in Italy, and one day I managed to put the car in a ditch. It took me about 20 minutes to reverse out.

At first I didn't think I'd get the car out, which was bad, because I do know the Italian for "Spaghetti Bolognese and a beer, please", but I don't know the Italian for "My car's in a ditch", and "Can you send a tow truck?".

No one is a Christian under their own steam, by trying to live life the right way for themselves. We are only ever Christians when we hear Jesus Christ saying to us, "Come" - and then we get out of the boat and find that we're drawn to him by a power that clearly does not come from us.

Jesus is God. He's truly in control. He shares his power, so that we can come to him. And then he reaches out and saves us. Read verse 29 with me [READ verses 29-31a].

Can you picture that moment when Peter is slipping down under the water, and Jesus grabs him by the hand and pulls him back up.

You know, the very heart of Christian faith is encapsulated in that one image.

Do I have to convince you that unless God rescues us, we have no way of finding God on our own? The sinfulness in us is too great.

It might be easy to imagine God as a kindly grandfather who will eventually overlook our sin and self-centredness - that's easy - until you encounter the might and the power of Jesus Christ, and realise that that can never happen.

We need a God who will rescue us from our sin - not who will pat us on the head at the end of life for having tried quite hard.

At the end of this service we'll baptise Shane Caiger, and his daughter Evie-May. Shane's being baptised because he's accepted this truth about Christ for himself. Without Christ we're all sinking in our sin. And Christ is the only one who can save us from sin.

This is Jesus - a mighty Lord, who saves.

Now isn't it amazing how even in the space of one week Jesus can shrink in our minds to being smaller and weaker than this?

When he becomes smaller than this, we stop worrying about living to please him. We start worrying more what other people will think of us, than what he will think.

And when in our minds he becomes weaker than this, we start thinking that the storms in our lives are out of his control.

We start thinking that he doesn't have the power to walk right over to where we are, struggling away.

We start thinking that he doesn't have the power to command us to come to him, and to reach down and grab us and save us.

But he does. He is more mighty, he is stronger, than you think.

And now because of who he is, what's required of us is **a single-minded trust in Jesus.**

This is what Christian faith is.

Faith isn't wishful thinking - hoping God might be real when your head tells you he isn't.

Faith is trust in the Jesus you can know, because he shows himself to you in the pages of his word, the Bible.

Let's go back to Peter in this incident, and see how we learn this from him. Do you see him there responding to Jesus' word?

Jesus says to him: "Come" - and that's enough to get Peter out of the boat, walking on the water.

Christian faith hears Jesus speaking to us - speaking to us through the Bible and through preaching - and that's enough for us to respond.

That's what every Christian has done. You've heard Jesus say, "Come", and you've got out of your boat and you've come - come, because you know you can trust him.

It's like a child who won't have the courage to jump off a wall until his Dad who he trusts says to him, "It's OK, you can jump. You'll be fine." That's not a blind leap, because he trusts what his Dad says.

Faith is a bold, considered response with my life to Jesus' words.

But then, do you see, we falter when we get distracted from Jesus.

That's in verse 30. When Peter saw the wind, he was afraid, and began to sink.

He's like a nervous tight-rope walker who stops looking forward to the other end of the rope, where it's firmly anchored. Instead he makes the fatal mistake of looking down. He gets overwhelmed by the circumstances he's in, and he starts panicking and wobbling.

Even the most mature Christian will feel like they're sinking, like their faith is faltering, they'll get afraid - if for one day they take their eye off Jesus Christ, and gaze instead on the storms in their life - on all the circumstances and troubles that threaten to drag them down.

When I play golf I'll mess up my shot, or even miss the ball altogether, if I take my eye off the ball even for a split-second.

A Christian will feel like their faith is wavering whenever they get distracted and look at themselves and their world and not at Christ. If you feel like you're sinking in your faith - ask yourself, "Where is my gaze fixed?"

Do you see that in verse 31 Jesus asks Peter: "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

And doubt here means: "waver". "Peter, why did your single-minded focus on me waver? Why did you get distracted?"

Actually it's pretty obvious why he doubted. He was an ordinary bloke who suddenly realised he was walking across a lake in the middle of a howling wind! That's going to bring doubts into anyone's mind.

But Jesus isn't asking, "What caused you to doubt?". We can always find reasons to waver in faith.

Instead, Jesus is asking - "What was the point of you taking your focus off me? It didn't do you any good, did it?".

But Peter didn't waver for long. As he sinks, he's crying out, "Save me".

That is single-minded trust in Christ. At the moment that you know you can do nothing to save yourself, you cry to Jesus to save you, and he reaches down and takes hold of you and won't let go.

In a few minutes' time we'll have Communion - and then Shane's and Evie-May's baptism. And what both of these ceremonies demonstrate is that Christian faith is not about my hanging on to God by offering him by goodness. It's about him constantly reaching down to me as I'm sinking under the weight of my own sin, and grabbing me and saving me.

So you must each ask yourself where you are in all this.

Maybe you would not have called yourself a committed Christian as you came here this morning. You must see in the image of Peter sinking in the water an image of yourself - helplessly sinking, one

day facing God's judgment without hope, as we all are, unless you cry out, "Lord Jesus, save me."

Or maybe you've been a Christian some time - your gaze has got distracted from Jesus. When you take your eye off him your circumstances seem overpowering, and he seems small and weak.

Well, here he shows you this message: "Don't waver. Don't let the eye of your faith be distracted from me. I am the mighty Lord, mighty to save. Do not waver. Trust."