



12 August 2023

## A Way Through the Sea (Matthew 14. 22-33)

© Sarah Bachelard

The reading we just heard is one of those multi-layered passages of Scripture that witnesses to the genius or, perhaps better, to the inspiration of its author. The more you look, the more you see – and the more it suggests resources for navigating experience, *our* experience, here and now.

Context is important. In the chronology of Matthew's gospel, Jesus has not long received news of the beheading of his cousin John the Baptist by the corrupt king Herod. John's execution is one of those pointless, almost random acts of violence that could so easily have turned out otherwise. It's true that John was perceived by Herod as a threat. John had condemned Herod's plan to marry his sister-in-law, Herodias, and Herod had arrested him. Indeed, the text says that Herod desired to put John to death, but he feared the people's reaction since they regarded him as a prophet. So John lived. But then came that stupid banquet for Herod's birthday, at which Herodias's daughter danced. Pleased by her performance, Herod recklessly promised to give her whatever she asked and, seizing *her* opportunity, Herodias prompted the girl to ask for John's head on a platter. Herod's fear of losing face before his guests now outweighed his fear of the people in general, and so John – without warning, without chance of reprieve – was killed to prop up the royal ego. Commenting on this episode, Stanley Hauerwas remarks perceptively on the 'insecurity of those in power', who 'lack the power to be truly powerful' and so 'live lives of destructive desperation'.<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus heard this news, Matthew writes, he 'withdrew ... in a boat to a deserted place by himself' (14.13). Little wonder. But the crowds followed him on foot, and when Jesus saw them, we're told, 'he had compassion for them'. And I find this moving. Jesus has every reason to crave time apart – time to grieve, to process the implications of what's happened and face what it presages for himself. Yet he's touched by the need of those who come to him and will not shut himself down. He

---

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), p.138.

'cured their sick' and fed them from the meagre resources available – from five loaves and two fish. Which is a whole different story. Then he dismissed the crowd, sent his disciples on ahead in the boat, and at last alone, went up the mountain by himself to pray.

As much of Matthew's gospel does, this whole sequence recapitulates the story of Moses. The feeding of the people in the wilderness, the praying alone on the mountaintop – these are references and images that would help the first Jewish hearers of this gospel recognise what's being claimed about the meaning of Jesus. He, like Moses, is come to lead his people out of slavery, to intercede on their behalf and to communicate the gift of God's covenant and call. And all this matters as background to the passage we've just heard.

Modern Western readers encounter the story of Jesus walking on water, and our first inclination is to debate whether it really happened, whether *any* miracles happen, whether the laws of physics may be suspended in such ways. But ancient Jewish readers would have focused on the archetypal symbolism of the sea as signifying chaos, death and de-creation. In this imaginative frame, to depict Jesus as 'walking on the sea', coming towards his disciples unbothered by the wind and the waves, is a profoundly theological claim. As Psalm 77 expresses it, power that is unaffected by the power of the sea is nothing less than the power of God: 'When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid: the very deep trembled ... Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron'.

The gospel's profound depiction of Jesus' meaning continues. Matthew says the disciples were terrified; they think this apparition is a ghost. 'But immediately', the text goes on, 'Jesus spoke to them and said: "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid' (14.27). And you'll probably recognise the significance of this phrase, 'it is I', *ego eimi*, which may also be translated 'I am' – 'Take heart, I AM'. This is how God names God's self, speaking to Moses out of the burning bush: 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you"' (Exodus 3. 14). And when Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid, and suggests that they too can walk on water, they too can be free with respect

to the power of chaos, he echoes the words of God as imagined by the prophet Isaiah: 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you ... For **I am** the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour' (Isa. 43.1-3). The more you look, the more you see and the more extraordinary the densely woven, richly allusive text of the gospel comes to seem.

Which is all very well as a piece of literary art. But what about the real world? What about the world where the sea, in the form of chaos, de-creation and death, threatens not just symbolically but actually? Where Pacific islands are threatened with inundation and ice sheets collapse, where people are sucked into the vortex of mental illness or sink in the face of unjust treatment, where random and seemingly pointless illness, violence, tragedy can strike without warning to devastate lives? Jesus calls Peter to walk on the water, to live freely in the face of the threat of overwhelm. The gospel implies that his capacity to do so is connected to faith, to his reaching out in trust to Jesus. But is that true? How is that true?

One thing we know. It's not true at the level of guaranteed rescue. Peter may have been tucked safely back into a boat, but John the Baptist lost his head. This Monday, the church celebrates the lives of 20<sup>th</sup> century martyrs – those who gave themselves in service of compassion, justice and truth, but who threatened a series of 'royal egos' and were killed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, hanged by the Nazis only days before the end of the war; Martin Luther King Jr, Oscar Romero gunned down in San Salvador, Janani Luwum murdered in Uganda by Idi Amin, and Maria Sobotsova and Edith Stein also victims of the Nazi regime. And it's not just the martyrs whose faith fails to guarantee their rescue from the deep waters of chaos. It's part of our experience too. The terrifying risk of life on earth includes incurable illness, irreparably dysfunctional relationships, systemic corruption, and impacts of trauma and injustice that continue to play out in persons and communities. What does it mean to 'look to Jesus' in the midst of this? What does it mean, even as lives are thwarted or lost, to trust that there is a way, that **he** is a way, through the sea? And that connecting to this way somehow makes a difference?

There's a sense in which each of us has to discover an answer to these questions for ourselves. John Main insists that the truth of faith is not about our ideas or images; it's the lived experience of rootedness in love, the discovery of a still-point, an abiding presence that endures. And it's about the willingness to keep entrusting ourselves to that faith, that experience, through fear, through despair, through pain and doubt. The gospel claims that Jesus lives that rootedness and testifies to its reality. He, like us, is shaken by events; he doesn't float above the suffering and grief of human life. And yet, he remains tethered to a power that is not ultimately determined by what happens and this affects how he lives in the world, the energy that breaks forth from him in the midst of things.

According to our tradition, discipleship of Christ, following him, trusting him, is about learning share in and grow into his way of being. This isn't a matter of will power, but of openness to the gift of his Spirit. In receiving this gift, Rowan Williams writes, we begin to 'share Christ's freedom from "threatenedness"'. This is 'never ... a freedom from exposure to suffering or from fear, but it is a decisive transition to that new level of existence where God is the only ultimate horizon – not death or nothingness'. To be free, in this sense, 'with Christ's freedom' is, as St John put it, to have 'passed out of death into life' (1 John 3.14).<sup>2</sup>

So how do we grow in this way? How do we receive this gift? How do we keep faith with this promised presence when we are sinking and there seems no boat alongside? A beginning, I think, is to cry out, to dare to know and name our need, 'Lord, save me'. Then it's to pray as Jesus did, alone on the mountain-top – undefended, given over. And it's to be willing to keep yielding ourselves to following what we glimpse of the path that's ours to walk, however life is, wherever we find ourselves – even if there is no rescue and circumstances do not change. Jesus shows us that the way through the sea is the way of love in the midst of things. It's the slow transformation of life by faithful perseverance in this love without end. Take courage, says he, for I AM.

---

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.22.