

## High Street Uniting Church Frankston

### Walking through the storms

### Matthew 14: 22 - 33



John Dominic Crossan, a progressive theologian, is quoted in comments about the believability of scripture, “I am not saying that the ancients wrote literal stories, and we are now clever enough to read them as metaphors, I am saying that they wrote metaphorical stories, and we are now foolish enough to read them literally.” And I believe that both parts of his statement are wrong. It’s a false dichotomy. The ancients treasured and recorded stories they believed to be

true, and in which there were great metaphors for the ongoing living out of their faith. If a story is only a metaphor it has little value as life changing truth. If it is only a literal story with no applicable metaphors it has little value for discipleship. And this story today of Jesus walking across the sea amid a storm is a classic example of the interwoven literal and metaphoric story. To dismiss the possibility of Jesus walking on water and consigning the story to metaphor or parable, means the ancient writers knew the last verse to be a lie; Jesus is not the Son of God. More importantly if this is just a story, what use is it as a metaphor? How does Jesus come to us in the storms of life if he isn’t the Son of God? Yes, there are metaphoric elements in the story, a comparison of the three versions of Jesus walking on the water shows adjustments and additions and different emphases. But the essential story – Jesus conquering the chaos and danger of the sea, just like God bringing creation out of the chaos of the waters and the Spirit brooding over the waters – that shines through in all three versions. And the metaphors for our living as disciples of Jesus shine through all three versions as well, even the extra impossibility of being like Peter and allowing Jesus to empower you to rise above the chaos and storms of life.

Remember the story from last week? Jesus had gone to a secluded place to be alone with his grief and to meditate and pray with God. That had been interrupted by the crowd, and now that they had been satisfied, he still wants to be alone, so he sends the crowds away and sends the disciples back across the sea. I can imagine that they had a lot of concerns and doubts – “Hang on Jesus, how are you going to meet us if we take the boat?” – and that is why Matthew says that Jesus ‘made them’ get in the boat. Now, the three accounts of this story give different direct or implied reasons for Jesus walking across the sea. Was it to help the disciples in the storm? Was it to surprise the disciples by getting to the other side ahead of them? Was it a lesson in faith for the disciples? Whatever the reason, quite understandably the disciples were not expecting to see Jesus walking up to them. I’m not sure that ‘ghost’ is the right translation here, because there are no ghosts in Jewish metaphysics or understanding. Maybe ‘spirit in human form’ is a better understanding of their fears, but like all encounters with the divine, Jesus words are ‘Don’t be afraid, it’s me!’ And when he gets into the boat, the storm stops, and the disciples worship him. This is a story about Jesus’ identity, just like the feeding story before it. Mark even emphasises that point by saying that the disciples were amazed and confused about Jesus conquering the storm because they didn’t understand about the loaves. For many readers, particularly modern minds, Jesus walking on water is a problem because a man who died in crucifixion can’t walk on water. The disciples fear and amazement say that this was a problem for them as well.

They had seen Jesus calm a storm on the sea, they had seen him feed thousands of people, but walking on the water wasn't part of what they understood to be Jesus' identity. And yet, they remembered, and told and preserved this story. It was a part of their evolving understanding of Jesus. In the light of the resurrection, the impossible of walking on water seemed understandable.

This story is in the Gospels because it is one of the prime stories about Jesus' identity. But it is also in the Gospels because it had meaning for the Early Church trying to follow Jesus in the world; it stood as a metaphor for how they experienced Jesus in their lives. They were out in the stormy, troubled world and feeling battered by the headwinds of persecution and they knew that Jesus came to them in those times of trouble and calmed the storms and reassured the people, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid". And so often, Jesus came to meet them from outside the community, walking through the storms, not in the boat. The face of the beggar you helped, the voice of the kind stranger offering somewhere to gather for worship, the meal for the disciple on the road. Jesus didn't just calm the storms of life; he walked through them.

This is a great story to support the ending of Matthew's Gospel – The Great Commission. Jesus sends us out on mission to the world, "Go, and make disciples", with the added words, "I am with you." We are sent into the world, some of us, like the disciples, are made to go. And the mission and life that we are sent on doesn't come with a promise of peace and harmony and safety, and at times it will feel like we are in a storm, with opposition, problems, attacks and stresses, and this story, and other stories, of Jesus on sea open us to what "I am with you" can mean;

- The storms don't stop Jesus being with us; he can walk through the storms of life and bring calm and strength and peace.
- Even when we try to be like Jesus and, with the best intentions, step into the storms in faith, although we get scared and fail, Jesus is there to lift us up.
- When Jesus does show up to help, we shouldn't give into fear, thinking he's a phantasm or confused because it doesn't look like the Jesus we expected. Do not be afraid, Jesus meets us in love and grace.

The stories of Jesus in the Gospels contain great ongoing lessons for how we are to live out our faith in Jesus. Calming presence during stress, peace in the face of the storms of life, the power of love and forgiveness, confident trust in God, in addition to all the lessons in the parables and teaching. The stories have differences in detail and maybe some exaggeration, but it's not a choice between literal and metaphoric, because their power as metaphors comes from the truth at their heart; they are not philosophical constructs but lived examples by Jesus, our Lord, God's Son.