



THE NEW SHOFAR

Jesus is Immanuel : God-with-us

Faith is walking in the light of the Lord our God

August 9th

I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.

There is no doubting the faithfulness and courage of this charismatic prophet Elijah. He has battled the prophets of Baal and the priests of Canaan and led God's people during the settlement of the Land of Milk and Honey. In the chapter prior to this one, Elijah defeated the priests of Baal in a momentous engagement on Mt Carmel. But he is now tired, and he is the focus of a vicious attack by Jezebel and King Ahab. And so he flees.

He makes clear the reasons for giving up on his mission... *The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too*". The apparently insurmountable challenge threatening him is the one coming from God's own people. God's chosen ones – from within Israel. They have compromised the covenant. They live more like Canaanites than as the Chosen People living under divine rule.

It is as if Elijah feels God owes him a calmer period of ministry. After all he has done for Yahweh is it too much to ask for a reward? He is fighting the enemies of God and yet he is the one at risk of death. And so, he flees. He heads off into the wilderness where he has the best biblical sulk ever. He sits under a bush and laments... *Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors*. Going on is too hard and results unimaginable.

He can see only three possibilities. Give up and go over to living as the Canaanites live. If he takes up Baal as his god, all will be well, and he can even continue to worship Yahweh. Baal and Yahweh – both could be seen as being true gods. There will be no more fighting. No more threats. Alternatively, he could continue on with a faithful prophetic ministry and run the very real risk of martyrdom. That is what God wants. But he chose instead to give up. He ran away into the wilderness and sulked!

Keeping our eyes on Jesus as we walk through the storm

It would be a mistake to spend time worrying about the historicity of this narrative from Matthew's Gospel. Amazing as it may seem to us the focus is not on the actual miracle of walking on water. What Matthew is offering is a teaching on the central importance of faith in the life of a disciple. If a disciple wishes to reach the goal set for them by God (in this case the far side of the lake) then they are going to need more than personal strength, skill and luck (the group of disciples had able fishermen among them). They are going to need to find a way of "walking on water".

It does not take much to throw their boat of life off course, to hold it up and to threaten to capsize it in the storms that crash down on the lake with little warning. Such storms were and still are a part of normal life on the Sea of Galilee. If you are going to fish, be prepared for storms. They are equally a normal part of the life of believers and non-believers alike. But Jesus is never far away. In the story He did not remain high up in the hills. He came down to them to be with them as they struggled.

It is only by persevering in faithfulness the Church grows

These disciples had not given up, turned around and gone with the wind returning to the place from which they had set off. They pursued their goal and suddenly, when they needed Jesus most urgently, He was there with them. But that was not an anticipated presence. The Jesus in whom they trusted had now shown any ability to walk on water. Maybe calm the storm from the beach, but not walking to them! Now they were in danger of missing him. It is for this reason Matthew does not show Jesus calming the storm. He merely offers them the gift of peace in the storm. He is there. In the storm. He is with them and so they also have God His Father with them.

To ensure readers understand this emphasis, Matthew adds the next story. Peter wants to walk to Jesus over the water. In this he succeeds initially because he has his faith focussed on Jesus. Nothing else is in his mind. He begins to doubt when he turns his eyes away from Jesus. When he breaks that connection to the Lord, he starts to sink... *when he saw the wind he was afraid and, beginning to sink...* The winds and the waves appear to be too great and so his faith wavers and he calls out for salvation.

The final image is the one Matthew would like his Church and every faith community to hold close to their hearts. It is when Jesus climbs into the boat with his disciples the wind and waves die down. Nothing is said. No command is given. He is with them.

Faith is about continuing through the storms assailing us

The boat occupied by Jesus and His disciples, making its way to the far side of the lake, is the model for the Church of every age. Yes, there will be storms. There will be times when the “wind” pushes us backwards and we fear being drowned. The more we look at the wind, the waves and the foamy ‘seas’ threatening us, the more we are likely to be lost. It is not our vocation to calm the sea. That is something with which God deals: **Psalm 107**...*He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.*

It is faith in Jesus and hope in the love He has for us that turns the tumultuous seas of fear, confusion, doubt and anxiety into the tranquil seas of peace, joy, purpose and belonging. We can reach the allusive “far side of the lake” through a total and absolute faith in Christ, through allowing our Saviour and Messiah to be our guide, our source of strength and our beacon of hope in the darkest of nights. There is never a time when we are separated off from Christ. Even when we struggle to discern Him, He is there.