

Stepping out

I grew up on the edge of the bush in Normanhurst West. Our house was on a cul-de-sac adjacent to a lookout over the bush, and we had several young families living around us. The children spent a lot of time outdoors – bike riding, building cubby houses and bushwalking. If you walked down the hill through the bush from the lookout, you came to a creek (which would eventually flow into Berowra Creek), and alongside the creek was an overgrown fire trail and a sewer line made of 600mm concrete pipes.

Walking along the top of the pipes was often the fastest way to travel through the bush. There was a side creek that flowed from Harris Park in Normanhurst, and we would often walk up there, too. Again, along the top of the sewer pipes. But there was one point on that line where the pipe gradually got higher and higher above ground as we headed upstream. It was probably reached around 3m above ground.

In later years, the water board installed spiked collars on the pipe to stop people walking along it, but in my childhood, you could happily walk it. Although... as you walked along the ground fell steadily away, until you were way up in the air, and you promptly sat down, straddling the pipe, and slowly worked your way to the other end that way.

Of course, we could have walked along the top of the pipe: it was the same size as the pipes we always walked along. It was no steeper or slipperier than we were used to.... But even so, we needed to sit down.

The theory was advanced that you only got scared if you looked down, so efforts were made to walk along the pipe staring resolutely at the other side. But at some point, the realisation that we were several metres above ground hit us, and we needed to sit down.

I was reminded of this as I was pondering our gospel reading this week, with the story of Peter jumping out of the boat and walking on water toward Jesus. And, miraculously, he could walk on water – until he saw the wind, and he realised where he was and what he was doing, and he began to sink.

“You of little faith,” said Jesus.

Peter had faith. Great faith. He trusted Jesus. Peter alone among the disciples jumped out of the boat and walked on the water... but ultimately, Peter’s faith failed him. He was doing something he knew was impossible (he was originally a fisherman, remember. He knew perhaps more than anyone that people couldn’t walk on water). He saw the wind. He might have looked down and seen his feet standing impossibly on the surface of the lake. Doubt set in, and he began to sink.

“You of little faith,” said Jesus, “why did you doubt?”

Why did he doubt? Why do any of us doubt?

To put this story into context, in verse 13 of this chapter, Jesus had learned of the death of his cousin, John, executed at the order of Herod the Tetrarch. Jesus tried to withdraw from the crowds and his friends to a solitary place. But the crowds followed him, and we read that Jesus had compassion on them – he healed the sick amongst them.

Then the disciples realised it was getting late and the crowds had nothing to eat... but Jesus fed them – five thousand men plus women and children, with nothing but five loaves and two fish. A miracle.

And again, Jesus tried to get away from the crowd, sending the disciples across the lake. He dismissed the crowd and headed up a mountainside to pray by himself, finally. No doubt with his heart heavy with the news of his cousin's death, and no doubt worn-out from the attentions of the crowd.

We heard that while Jesus was on the mountainside, the boat was a considerable distance from land and it was being buffeted with waves from a headwind.

We often think the disciples were scared, but the text doesn't tell us that they were – or that there was any danger to them. After all, at least Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishermen before they became disciples, and they would have been skilled at boat-handling.

So the crossing, into a headwind, with the waves buffeting the boat, may not have been particularly dangerous – but it would certainly have been hard going. They had to continue though, because Jesus told them he would meet them on the other side.

As they were rowing through the night – working hard on the oars against the wind – they were naturally looking back toward the shore they had come from. In the darkness, they saw something unbelievable – something impossible. They saw Jesus coming toward them... not in a boat, not swimming, but walking... somehow walking on the surface of the lake.

Their experience – like ours – was that people don't walk on water – they can't walk on water. The explanation can only be supernatural: "It's a ghost!".

Now they were scared – not by the wind and the waves, but by the possibility that a ghost was coming after them.

But Jesus called out to them, across the lake, into the wind, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

Which is a nice assurance... but I do wonder how the disciples would have taken it. They are still witnessing something supernatural, after all.

Then Peter speaks out amongst the disciples. I've spoken about Peter before, how he's the one to speak quickly and acts impetuously – he's the one who doesn't hold back. I think the letters of Peter that we have in the New Testament really show that – compare them to the letters of Paul or John, and you really see his impulsiveness and his passion pouring out.

Here, Peter calls out "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water."

In response, Jesus says simply "Come."

Without hesitation, Peter got out of the boat, and walked toward Jesus. On the surface of the lake. Not only had Peter witnessed the impossible, but now he was also doing it.

I don't know about you, but I have so many questions about walking on water. Does the surface seem slippery? Is it hard to balance? Do you go up and down on the waves, or simply walk through them? Do your feet even get wet?

How ever it worked though, Jesus was doing it, and now Peter was doing it to.

And then Peter saw the wind, and realised where he was and what he was doing, and was – quite naturally – afraid. In that moment, the surface of the lake ceased to support him, and he began to sink. He cried out "Lord, save me!"

If we look to verse 31, we read that Jesus said “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” we might think that if only Peter had a little bit more faith, he could have kept walking on the water.

But when we jump to that, we miss the first part of verse 31: Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.

If we jump to what Jesus said, we miss what Jesus did.

I think when we realise what Jesus did, it can change the tone of what Jesus said.

When Peter began to sink, he cried out “Lord, save me!” and immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. Immediately, Jesus saved him. Just as, somehow, Jesus had supported Peter as he walked on the water, he now supported Peter as he sank into it.

Only then, does Jesus speak, “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

We often think that this is Jesus reprimanding Peter for his lack of faith, but perhaps it’s just Jesus describing Peter’s faith. A little later in Matthew’s gospel, in chapter 17, Jesus said “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:20).

A little faith is okay. A little faith is a good start. It is not the amount of faith we have, but the object of our faith that matters. Jesus is not angry with Peter, but only hopes to strengthen Peter’s faith by asking him the challenging question: “Why did you doubt?”

“You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

Why, indeed? Why do you think that Peter doubted? He’d been with Jesus now for a long time. He’d seen miracles. I’m sure Peter asked himself, “Why did I doubt?” and “How can I keep from doubting the next time?” Maybe he even pondered “Did I have faith in Jesus, or was I trying to prove that I was a person of faith?”

It’s something for us to ponder too. We are Christians. We are followers of Jesus. We are people of faith. We talk about sharing our faith. We talk about growing in faith. We talk about building up our faith. We like to think we step out in faith... but when we do sometimes sink, we might wonder if our faith wasn’t strong enough, or even we didn’t have enough faith.

But I wonder if sometimes when we claim we are stepping out in faith it’s because we are showing others how strong our faith is, or trusting in ourselves: in our words, our education, our experience, our ability to handle adversity. Sometimes we do that, rather than acting in whatever small amount of faith we might have.

Because it’s not faith that’s important. It’s in whom we have our faith.

Our faith is only effective when our faith is in Jesus.

Strong faith in ourselves won’t get us very far... but even a little faith in Jesus will get us saved.

Jesus saved Peter – Peter of little faith. And he will save us of little faith too.

When Peter and Jesus get back to the boat and climb in, the wind and the waves die down – reminding us of that other time on the lake, in Matthew 8:24-27

²⁴ Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. ²⁵ The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"

²⁶ He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

²⁷ The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"

This time, though, the disciples go further than just asking what kind of man Jesus is – this time they make a declaration of who he is: Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (14:33)

The disciples in the boat worshipped Jesus. They'd witnessed miracles, and know they responded with worship. Think about what they'd seen: the healings, the raising the dead, casting out of demons, the calming of the storm. Yes, this was the Son of God, and they didn't hesitate to worship him.

But how strong was their faith? They hadn't stepped out of the boat like Peter had. They hadn't walked on the water like Peter had. They hadn't begun to sink into the lake like Peter had. They hadn't called out to Jesus to save them. But Jesus had still come to them and saved them.

Jesus might have said to Peter "You of little faith," and challenged his doubt, but it was Peter who had stepped out onto the lake. The others had stayed in the relative safety of the boat. The boat may have been buffeted by the wind, but it was still familiar, still safer than stepping out to do the impossible.

Jesus made no comment on the faith of the disciples in the boat, nor did he ask them why they doubted. But surely they had only a little faith, too, and surely they doubted. And just as surely, Jesus saved them as well.

We should think about the second part of what Jesus said to Peter, too... "Why did you doubt?". Peter had seen the evidence of healings, the raising the dead, the casting out of demons, the calming of the storm – and he'd even experienced walking on water for himself. So why did he doubt?

For that matter, what did he doubt? Did he doubt Jesus? Well, when he first met Jesus he trusted him enough to turn away from his livelihood as a fisherman to follow him. He'd trusted Jesus enough to go out and preach the message of the kingdom to the people of Israel. He'd trusted Jesus enough to step out of that boat.

Maybe, he doubted himself. Doubted his own faith. Doubted his worthiness – his worthiness to walk with Jesus. I think that's a doubt that we all have from time to time.

A few years ago, I was doing baptism preparation with Gabi – a woman who'd joined Pymble Chapel and wanted to be baptised. We were going through what baptism was and would happen in the service, and suddenly Gabi interrupted and said something like "No! This is too much. I'm not worthy of this!" And this started a long discussion of God's grace – Jesus welcomes us as we are – however unworthy we might be, however little faith we might have.

There's often emphasis, in the church, on how unworthy we are, how, as Paul says in his letter to the Romans (3:23) that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But when we think about that, we need to remember the next part of what Paul wrote "they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus".

That's why each week in church, after we've confessed our sins, we are always reminded of the forgiveness we have.

As I ponder Jesus' words to Peter, as Peter is sinking into the lake, but after Jesus has reached out to him and caught him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" it's not so much an admonishment, as it is an acknowledgement – and acknowledgement of Peter's faith, and Peter's humanity.

"I've got you," says Jesus, "Did you expect anything less?"

How is your faith today? Like the disciples, we have the evidence of who Jesus is – not first-hand, but we have the accounts of the witnesses, and we have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. And our response, like that of the disciples is to worship him – that's why we gather at St Ives Uniting church, after all – to worship.

But sometimes we are all troubled, things don't go as we hope or expect, and life is a battle, and we find ourselves maybe not walking on the surface of a lake, but certainly living through uncertain and unsettling times, and our faith, individually and collectively, gets a bit shaky.

We of little faith, why do we doubt?

Because we're human. Because life is hard.

But Jesus loves us anyway, and even as we're sinking, he reaches out to us and saves us.

Amen.