

A couple of years ago, while out for a walk, I came to a large puddle across the track I was walking on. There was no way round it, but it didn't look too deep, so I confidently stepped forward. The next thing I knew I was up to my knees in thick orange mud. (For those of you who have been watching the endless re-runs over recent months, images of the Vicar of Dibley might come to mind!)

Worse - in pulling one leg out I left a shoe stuck in the mud and in digging down to retrieve it, my arm then also was covered. I was some distance from home and closer to where I planned to stop for tea. So after some dithering, I walked on, glad there were not too many people about, as it is hard not to be noticed when you have stepped into a deep muddy puddle.

I hadn't gone out that day looking for inspiration for a sermon, but when I read again this gospel account of Peter as he stepped out of the boat, I remembered the panic of sinking, the silent cries for help and then continuing on to do what I had set out to do. I reflected on what Peter's experience was like and how it took him on, in his journey of faith. So, I want to think a little this morning about that act of stepping out in faith as we see it here in Peter – and what it may mean for us today, wherever we are on our own journeys.

This account of Jesus walking on water appears in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and John, in each case following an account of the feeding of five thousand. In the evening, Jesus had gone to pray alone while the disciples set off in a boat and were blown by strong winds some distance from the shore. It seems they may have been battling the winds on their own for some time because it was early in the morning when they saw a figure walking towards them and were afraid, thinking it must be a ghost. But Jesus called to reassure them 'It is I – do not be afraid!' He knew all along what was happening to them and was there with them. In Mark and John's account Jesus then got into the boat with them, the storm ceased, and they came safely to shore. But Matthew has Peter call out: "Lord if it is you – command me to come to you on the water". Jesus called him, and he stepped out. But when he let his attention focus on the winds, he began to sink. He called to Jesus to save him and Jesus reached out to him and took him back to the boat. Then the storm ceased and all of them on the boat worshipped Jesus proclaiming him as the Son of God.

The sea at that time – and in some places now - was associated with evil powers that only God could overcome. Mark records an earlier miracle when Jesus was with the disciples in a boat that had got caught in a sudden storm. Jesus stilled the waves and they asked each other who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him? So it took courage, but also some faith that this was indeed the Lord, for Peter to step out when Jesus called to him. God's call can often be to do something a bit scary – maybe seemingly impossible, but it never calls us to do it alone.

I remember in Sunday School being taught if only Peter had stayed strong in his faith, kept his eye firmly on Jesus, he would not have found himself sinking. It certainly is good advice to keep looking to Jesus - and Jesus did appear to gently chide Peter – you of little faith, why did you doubt? But if we are not careful, we might take it to suggest that if only we keep our eye on Jesus we won't get into choppy waters or find ourselves having to battle with life's difficulties. Or we may feel guilty, blame ourselves for not having enough faith when bad things happen to us. It was not an issue of faith, but fear when Peter noticed the strong wind, that led to his sinking. Jesus was present throughout and was ready at any moment to lift him up. God's call never comes without that promise - 'It is I – do not be afraid!' - I will be with you.

So what Peter discovered – and we too may discover - was that faith is not a way to escape the winds and waves of life's uncertainties and challenges – rather it is the way through the storms. Often it is in those moments when we are most tempted to give up that we realize, just as Peter did, that help is only an outstretched arm away. Jesus was there amid the buffeting waves and walked with him to the boat.

We make of this miracle what we will – but it remains a fact that many can testify from experience of being lifted up in the storms of life – brought safely through those personal storms of loss, betrayal, illness, bereavement or whatever it is that blows us off course. It may not be that the storms themselves are calmed, but rather that Christ's presence has the power to bring calm amid the turmoil and chaos – and the strength and courage to persevere.

In the end Peter grew in faith as a result of his stepping out. It changed him but it did not change who Jesus was. Whether we are in the boat or in the water makes no difference to who he is - 'It is I – do not be afraid!'. Stepping out of the boat may call us out of our human-made places of security, out of our comfort zones, not so that we can have the proof that he is Lord, but so that we can be a visible presence for him and with him in the world. It does not guarantee a smooth or perfect walk - but it does promise the possibility to learn and grow – and to become part of his continuing work.

Sometimes, like my puddle we find the challenges ahead are deeper than we expected - and we are marked, maybe even scarred as a result. Such experiences will make a difference to the way we live our lives – and the difference will bear witness to those around us. We trust his assurance that he will be with us even through the storms that are bound to come our way. We learn to keep our eyes on Jesus and grow strong in our faith so we can continue to walk through the storm.

Paul knew that well. When he stepped out in faith after his Damascus experience he entered a life that would bring many challenges – he listed some of them in 2 Corinthians 11: floggings, imprisonment, attack by bandits, hunger, thirst, pain, and even the danger of storms at sea and shipwreck. And yet he continued his ministry – called by God, led by Jesus, who he knew as Lord and above all knew was with him throughout. And as we heard, writing to the Romans, themselves new Christians facing the possibility of persecution, he said: 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

But, he went on, 'how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?'

Come Jesus said to Peter – step out in faith
Come Jesus said to Paul – step out in faith
Come Jesus says to each one of us – step out in faith.
be my witnesses in a troubled and needy world.
hear my call - 'It is I – do not be afraid!'.

Ruth Goatly