



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

How easy or difficult do you find it to trust God in the midst of stormy times in your life? Why is that?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 85:8 – 13

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
**for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.**
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;

righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

**Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.

Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of love and life,
you came to reconcile all things to yourself in Christ,
and to renew the heavens and the earth.
We bring to you those things in our own lives
and within the life of the world we share
in need of transformation and fresh hope:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
God of mercy, forgive us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
God of love, comfort us.

We bring to you the brokenness and oppression in our world:
God of justice, disturb us.

We bring to you the times we've hidden from the risks of love:
God of courage, fortify us.

We bring to you the failures of the Church to stand for justice:
God of liberation, convict us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of love and life,
you came to reconcile all things to yourself in Christ,
and to renew the heavens and the earth.
Set us free us to follow you, and grant us that peace
which passes all our understanding. **Amen**

Reading Matthew 14:22 – 33

Sermon

One of my favourite hobbies is photography, and in the age of digital photography, there is no limit on the quantity of pictures that can be taken. Sometimes, this is a good thing, because it makes it possible to have several goes at getting a photograph just right. However, its downside is that not having to be selective can lead to taking poorer quality pictures, if one is not careful. My first camera used films with a very limited number of possible exposures, which required greater care so as not to waste any. Moreover, when the film was complete, it was important to remember to change it, otherwise one would end up with a double exposure and hence some *very interesting* results. A friend of mine recently told me of how she once made that mistake and ended up with pictures of a lake and her husband combining to make it appear as if he was walking on water! Apparently, the photo in question caused great hilarity, and he enjoyed dining out on being like Jesus in today's reading. The story of Jesus walking upon water has given rise to much humour, including in this case, but it has also generated fierce arguments as to what to make of its account of an incredible event which, whatever else we might say, was not a quirk of the camera.

Jesus was taking time out to pray, after his previous attempt to seek solitude and the space to be with the Father had failed. A vast crowd had followed him out into the wilderness after he was spotted, which he responded to with compassion by curing the sick and feeding the

entire company from very limited rations (Matthew 14:13 – 21). Now he had the chance, Jesus had gone up a mountain to pray, and sent the disciples ahead of him in their boat, over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (14:22 – 23). That lake is known for the changeability of conditions; it can go from calm to tempestuous in just a matter of minutes, and even with at least four fishermen on board, by evening the boat was in real trouble. Matthew describes it as battered by the waves and struggling against the wind, but these translations do not convey the violence of the Greek – it would be more accurate to say that the waves tormented the boat and that the wind was oppressive for that beleaguered and frightened crew (14:24). By early morning, and after a long night of struggling to stay afloat, they were terrified, and convinced they were seeing a ghost, as Jesus walked upon the waters towards them (14:25 – 26).

Now, some commentators insist we take this at face-value as supernatural evidence of Jesus' divine status. For them, miracles function as proof that we really are looking at God in human form. For others, there must be a naturalistic explanation, such as a layer of rocks on which Jesus actually walked being just below the surface and hence creating the illusion that he was strolling over the water. In my view, neither of these approaches cut the mustard, and sterile arguments about supernaturalism miss the point Matthew was making through including this episode. Such debates are a product of the modernist critique of the Bible looked at through the distorting lens of scientism and American fundamentalist reaction against this scepticism which has spread to other contexts. If – instead of getting drawn down this blind alley – we instead consider the *symbolism* at work, we receive a much richer portrayal of who Jesus is and why he matters, as well as gaining deeper insights into what it means to be a disciple today, amid the waves and winds that batter us.

In what is the most overtly grounded of the four Gospels in Judaism, Matthew goes to great lengths to capture a picture of Jesus as being

the natural successor to the great hero of God's people, Moses. The parting of the waters of the Red Sea, so that the Israelites could flee from Egyptian oppression, forms the backdrop, as Jesus is depicted as exercising power over the waves and the wind (14:32). As God's creative Word in human form (John 1:1 – 14, Colossians 1:15 – 20), his command of the elements justifies the worship from the disciples of the One who is both Israel's Messiah and God's Son (14:33). We know that Matthew's community were being tormented, dealing with deep hostility from religious and secular authorities like, and that the connections between water and the forces of chaos and destruction in Hebrew culture would have been in their minds as they heard this story read. Jesus's divine reassurance to the frightened disciples in the midst of the storm (14:27) and his rescue of Peter when he cried out for salvation (14:31) would no doubt have been very comforting. What is more, I reckon that the rebuke he received about his dearth of faith (14:31) was less about panicking when he realised the winds and waves were still there (14:30), and more about his doubting that word of reassurance (14:27), so that his 'lack of faith' was the failure of trust in his friend.

I have heard many a sermon on this story which has concluded with an exhortation to keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus, and not to permit doubt to make us notice the wind and waves. However, spectres of supernaturalism, and an unquestioning certainty that is the opposite of real faith, are clearly visible in the resulting picture, as if we forgot to change the film and hence have been left with a double exposure. For me, *trust* is the subject of the photograph this episode captures, and Peter's problem was that he copied on the water what the Satan did in the wilderness (4:1 – 11), and put Jesus to the test, with an 'if ... then' demand (14:28) that was bound to end badly. The wind and the waves will sometimes batter our boat as we sail on life's waters, and calm one minute can become tempest the next. Just as Peter's attempt to reach Jesus failed when he discovered he could not wish

them away, being a disciple does not mean everything will be easy, but our faith is not somehow inadequate if it sometimes feels we are sinking. We will face storms that being a Christian will not just magic away, but God's promise is that we do not face them alone and thus when we cry out to God, we are heard. We can place our trust in an irrepressible love that will never let us go, even when we 'do a Peter' and mess up. As the Psalmist says:

My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows have gone over me.
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

(Psalm 42:7 – 8, 11)

Recommended Resource of the Week

Miranda Threlfall-Holmes's 2021 book *How to Eat Bread* outlines a range of approaches to finding nourishment in the Bible.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing