



# Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church August 10, 2014

## Matthew 14: 22-33

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Two stories to begin:

*In the Narnia story, "The Voyage of the Dawn Treader", the Pevensie cousin, Eustace, is totally out of his depth and struggling to understand this alien world of Narnia. There he is on what for him is an ancient, tiny wooden ship, 'little bigger than a life raft', being tossed around by the sea and the wind. He complains and whinges and boasts to the ship's captain that in his world, ocean liners are so large and stable that you can hardly tell you are at sea at all.*

*In an ad on television at the moment, for one of the banks, a couple are sitting in an Italian restaurant overlooking a harbour and trying to decide on their business future. They complement the restaurant's owner on his business and ask what his secret for success is. He replies, "A ship in the harbour is safe, but that is not what ships are for".*

Two stories that speak to today's Gospel reading from different directions, both reflecting on Jesus question to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" They reflect on that question because Jesus had already told the disciples "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Do not be afraid of the storms to the extent that you either build a secure refuge from them, or hide on the land and don't even set to sea. Do not be afraid, for Jesus has promised to be with us, and when he is with us, God is with us.

The church has, for centuries, been caught by fear of the storms of life and in need of hearing afresh this little story of faith in our Lord who can conquer and indeed trample down those very storms. In the early and later Middle Ages, communities built churches and monasteries like castles with big walls and gates to protect the communities and to be sanctuaries. The very public storms of wars and uprisings were kept out, but the small private storms of poverty and sickness were kept out as well. Not only were they trying to ride out the storms, they weren't able to reach out, or step out, to help others trapped in the storms. A large, walled monastery doesn't proclaim faith in God, it screams fear of the world. It doesn't proclaim faith in God, it says, 'we trust in the strength of masonry and stone and wood. The Psalmist proclaims, "Some place their faith in chariots and horses, our faith is in the Lord our God". The Lord who created in defiance of the chaos of

the waters, the Lord who rescued Noah and his family from the chaos of flood, the Lord who led the people through the barrier of the sea. When Jesus says “it is I”, the Greek phrase is the same as “I am”, the name of God. When the church fails to hear these stories of Jesus conquering the seas and the storms, it fails to hear “I am with you, take heart and do not be afraid”. It doesn’t take a great amount of faith to trust in God and journey in small boats, hence the small boat is the symbol of the World Council of Churches. Jesus isn’t condemning Peter for having small faith, he says at other times that is all that is required. He is saying, “What caused you to give up on even that small faith?” All it takes to sail and walk and work in the storms, is enough faith to trust in the presence and the provision of God.

At the other extreme are the communities that fail to even set out on the sea. Fear of the possibility of storms, controversies, opposition or ridicule, they stay in their church and do safe things. We talk of a crisis in the church at the moment, with congregations getting older and smaller and lacking in faith and hope. One US pastor is quoted as saying, “the reason that we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it”. Doing nothing that might offend people, or make them think we are weird or out dated, is still doing nothing. Instead of sailing out on the sea, and facing the storms trusting in the presence of Jesus, we sit on the beach and splash in the shallows. An irony for me in the story of Jesus walking on the water is that the disciples seem more afraid of Jesus than the waves and the wind. Maybe we sit on the beach because we are afraid that Jesus is out on the sea asking us to step into storms!

In this time and culture – described as post Modern and post Christendom – we are the small boat caught in the storms of life. And Jesus is walking in the midst of those storms, calling us to follow, and calling some of us to step out of the boat and join him. And even though we are afraid and even though we see the waves and feel the wind, and even though we feel that we don’t have enough faith or enough skill or strength, we are called to have enough faith to hear the assurance; “Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid, come”. Amen