

Walking on water - fear of falling/failing

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 13 August 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 10A

**Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14:22-33; Contemporary Reading:
"No other plans" a story by William J Bausch in *A World of Stories***

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

Jesus sends his disciples away in their boat while he dismisses the crowds and spends time alone in prayer. In the early hours of the morning, when they are still far from land and being battered by the wind and waves, he appears to them, walking across the water. Even before he arrives, their situation is perilous, though presumably not unfamiliar to fisher-folk; but it is the appearance of Jesus, not the storm, that terrifies them most. They think it is "a ghost."

Jesus walking on the water seems an unnecessary story. Last week's gospel miracle involved feeding five thousand families, when at first it had seemed that there was nothing to eat. People need to be fed. And the story last week had us recognise that it was not Jesus who fed the crowd, but rather the disciples who had been given the food by Jesus. And to recognise our calling as disciples to feeding, hospitality and inclusion. Not to turn away from hunger and need, but to come closer to it.

But really, walking on water seems rather superfluous to the needs of the human community.

I don't need to tell you that the truth of this story will probably have little to do with the facts or the historicity. The truth will be found in the story, and the re-telling of the story, first in the community of the early church that first shared it orally and then wrote it down, and now, perhaps, in the re-telling of the story in our community and context.

Having at first struggled to see what the point of a supernatural performance piece might be, I did then notice something I hadn't noticed before. Usually the interpretation of the miracle story focuses on Jesus walking on the water contrasted to Peter falling and sinking, and being rescued by Jesus. Peter is portrayed as falling and failing the test of faith. And this is surely one intent of the story, but in a careful reading I notice that the story also tells us that even if only for a short time, Peter did also walk on water.

In verse 29 we hear, "*Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.*" Peter actually did what Jesus did - until he lost sight of Jesus and became overwhelmed by the strong wind, the wind of which he was afraid.

Peter's faith came and went during the encounter. As Jesus approached the boat, he announced, "*it is I.*" Maybe still thinking it was a ghost, Peter begins his response with doubt and uncertainty..."*if it is you; if it is really you, command me to come to you on the water.*"

At the invitation of Jesus, Peter did what Jesus commanded and walked on water. On water! As we visualise this story in our minds, I think we ought not to have Peter sinking too quickly into the water. I think we should not rush to judgement about his lack of faith.

We should not be too quick to turn this into a story about dependence that erases Peter's agency in taking those few steps. This is more than a "*don't worry, you can rely on God story*." It is both an invitation to walk and a recognition that we cannot do the walk – or the work - of life alone.

There is so much going on in our world at the moment...I came to this sermon preparation with so many things on my mind from the week that has been. Last Sunday afternoon when I got home from church, I heard that Liberal MP Dean Smith had released a draft of yet another marriage equality bill – but one that was based on the Senate inquiry that happened earlier in the year.

So, I quickly wrote a media release in communication with a group from around the country who are connected to Equal Voices, the ecumenical group that is in solidarity with gay and lesbian people in the church.

In less than 24 hours, 80 clergy and religious academics had signed on in the hope that we could add to the pressure for a free vote in parliament. Instead the postal survey, the survey that you have when you are not having a plebiscite, was announced and the storm has been unleashed yet again, battering the little boat of all who hope for a simple law change to allow same-sex couples, transgender and intersex people, to marry.

I know that, for many people, this is not big deal; it's a non-issue because they are personally not opposed to the law change and are not directly affected by the loud opposition from groups like the Australian Christian Lobby who have called children of same-sex couples a "stolen generation" – and other insults and vilification.

During the week, I heard from two young women, both Christian, both lesbian, who do not know one another. One is at Uni and the other still at high school. Within 24 hours of the plebiscite announcement, they had received appalling abuse on social media for speaking out as Christians who supported marriage equality. They were abused by Christians for being gay and ridiculed by LGBTI people for being Christian. And from violently homophobic men, both of them had been subject to threats of vicious sexual violence and death. Surely that must matter to us all.

On my mind too, is Manus Island, a place far from here, out of sight, out of mind, holding people who came here in little boats. Now they are surrounded by water, imprisoning them, as asylum seekers dumped there by the Australian government.

At first, we who hoped for something better, rejoiced when the PNG government declared the camp illegal under their constitution. Now we know that the Australian government is turning off the electricity, ending security, recreational and medical support, and abandoning the men to live in the local community that does not want them, where they have already been attacked many times.

Hamed Shamshiripour, aged 31, was found dead in the jungle outside the detention centre six days ago. His mental health, which had deteriorated terribly over the past year, had not been addressed. During an earlier psychotic episode, he had been beaten by the guards

who should have cared for him. Though we do not if he died from an attack or from suicide, once again Australia has the blood of an asylum seeker on its hands.

How are we to keep stepping out onto the water when we know that these wild winds of injustice, discrimination and, I think, hate is not too strong a word, are buffeting our tiny boat.

I wish there were more signs of hope, but in the case of Manus Island and Nauru, I do give thanks for signs of faith. For people keeping faith. While the letters page of the Saturday Sydney Morning Herald carried numerous expressions of support for marriage equality, there were also letters about Hamed and about the men on Manus Island. Stephen Langford was the author of one of those letters. He wrote: *Australia stands condemned around the world for its mistreatment of refugees. Hamed Shamshiripour should have been here. We could have been helping him. Instead we subjected him to the nightmare of Manus. Those men on Manus, they are showing more human solidarity with each other, "mateship" as we like to call it, than the whole of the Australian population put together. We stand with them.*

When we are asked to step onto the water in spite of the wind, in spite of how hopeless it appears. When we sign letters to politicians, or write letters to newspapers, it often doesn't seem like much. We feel powerless to effect change. And yet if we do not do these things, if we do not take action publicly, nothing will ever change.

This year I felt, when the legislation was announced again, and when I read these stories, that maybe I haven't done enough work in social justice and the marriage equality issue. Not enough work to raise the voice of Christian people who want to love and support the relationships of LGBTI people in the public square. Have I had less faith? Have I been focusing more on the challenges facing Pitt Street, the winds that are rocking the boat of our church as we face the enormous challenges of caring for a heritage building with few financial resources and a feeling of being under threat from unhelpful interests in the wider church?

For much of this year, I feel like I've stayed in the boat and tried to keep us on course, when we lost the income that paid for a full-time office manager. I know I am not the only one who has felt like this year has been a matter of bailing out the water that has been threatening to swamp us.

But this week, instead, I have not done everything I should have done to keep the church on course, to respond to the needs of the hungry or to bail us out, because the marriage equality media release generated an opportunity to be interviewed on ABC TV News along with Lyle Shelton of the Australian Christian Lobby. When I got the call at 7:30 on Tuesday morning, with 90 minutes notice to get to the studio (and get showered and dressed!) I did feel like I was stepping out onto a frightening sea. Lyle Shelton is one of the slickest media trained spokespeople I have ever encountered. He is practiced at running rings around people who think differently about LGBTIQ people and about marriage equality. He will not debate the issues but instead depends on lies and fearmongering.

I was nervous as could be. Lead in my stomach and a knot in my throat. But as I sat on the high stool in the studio I remembered that it was not a matter of my performance. I did not have to walk on water. I had been given an opportunity so that LGBTI people could hear that God loved them, and that God would be with them through whatever lay ahead leading up to the survey. That Christians would be raising their voices in wild and dangerous public places; that we would be with them. And I did feel calmer, not less passionate, but calmer and some strength from somewhere kept me focused, not on the terrible things that were being said, but on the hope and the joy that equality would one day bring.

And in the last few days I have heard from many people, via phone calls, email, Facebook and twitter – about how much the solidarity of Christians means at this time.

You have enabled me to do this and I am grateful, but you can do this too. And you can do what Stephen did too - write letters to the editor. Write to MPs. In the vote, the most significant group of people will be the “soft yeses.” They may be swayed by strident voices whipping up wild fears into an almighty storm. Or they could be swayed by you telling your story, telling them that you think it matters what kind of society we create, through laws that treat people equally. You can tell them that, as a person of faith, you are not afraid.

In stepping out of the boat, we are human, we will fail, we will get things wrong, but this story reminds us that in stepping out we are not alone. In stepping out, we encounter the presence of Sacred Energy that will support us, save us and enable us to stand another day, in solidarity with people whose human rights are denied, whose bodies are threatened with violence.

Perhaps that boat full of disciples is the church, not only then but today?

It is human to feel despair and panic in such situations. And yet we also know how it feels for the power of Jesus, reaching out to us to give us strength, to fill us with calm and endurance.

I believe that we are here together today because God has called us here.

If the disciples were in the boat in the first place because of the call of God that came to them through Jesus, then we in the church are also here because God has called us to be here. Jesus is full of commands in this story. But he doesn't simply tell people what to do and leave them hanging there, helpless. Whatever Jesus commands, Jesus makes possible. New Testament scholar Charles Cousar writes. "*The commands of Jesus, taken seriously, create miracles; they open an incredible reservoir of divine resources.*"

These resources are for us too.

It is a remarkable gift that this story can be read in the community and for each one of us, facing life alone or together, in the church; for all of the followers of Jesus face boats that rock fearsomely, and nights of terror and doubt. The disciples, on the sea that night, experience an epiphany--an appearance of Christ not unlike a resurrection appearance. In the dark night of fear and helplessness, the risen Christ, comes to the disciples – as the risen Christ is known to us now in Christa/Community. In communities of justice seeking friends – and communities of solidarity and resistance.

We are not alone. We live in God's world. We can trust ourselves to be the people of God in this place, because we are trusted and accompanied by Divine Presence, assuring us: "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*"

This is a word to us because Jesus has no other plan – and we are the people who have heard this message –who through our trust in one another and in God, can change the world.