

**Pentecost 12**  
**7/08/2005**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Genesis 37:1-4; 12-28**  
**Ps105**  
**Romans 10:5-15**  
**Matthew 14:22-33**

### **On rowing against the wind...**

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While away on holidays my Aunt gave me a copy of her memoirs. She is 90 years old and the last of my parent's generation. The memoirs contained a lot of new information, but at the same time what she wrote is connected with stories we had heard as children, or were part of ourselves. Sometimes what she says varies from what we previously understood. She has a particular perspective, but the memoirs are not a record made at the time. They are memories written down more recently, often incorporating later reflection. The Memoirs would be of interest to anyone, but it makes a difference if you are a Smith, and in the story.

The process by which we came to have the Gospels was rather like that. Stories that at first circulated in an oral tradition were finally written down, each evangelist offering his particular perspective often with a quite different emphasis. The story of Jesus walking on the water is told in Matthew, Mark and John. Although it would make a terrific bible study it would be too complicated to look in detail at all three versions in a sermon. But here we can draw out Matthew's particular emphasis, which is that Jesus is the Son of God, Lord over chaos and darkness who gives his disciples the power to follow him.

In the stories of antiquity the image of the sea looms large as a source of chaotic power, of which even the gods stand in awe. Journeys across the sea inevitably involve some sort of challenge or threat. In the Bible the sea is a source of chaotic power but it is, nevertheless, part of God's creation which has submitted to God's commands. Even the fearful sea monsters are under God's rule. Journeys across the sea, as in the crossing of the Red Sea, or Noah and the Ark, are perilous and involve profound trust in God. Sea journeys are metaphors for the challenge of keeping faith under trial.

Most contemporary scholars consider Matthew was written by a third generation Christian about the year 90 of the Christian era. What we read about was written down in the light of the Resurrection, after the Great Commission and includes reflection on the contemporary life of the church. When we hear of Jesus going to the Mountain to pray, it suggests he has gone to be with God - a post resurrection image. The disciples' journey without Jesus is analogous to what it was like when they were called to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, and he was taken from them. The ensuing journey was dark and difficult. They strove against a hostile environment, symbolised by battering waves and an adverse wind. By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, the safety the Christians had enjoyed as a Jewish sect protected by Roman law had evaporated. As Christianity began to differentiate itself from Judaism the new movement's refusal to worship the Emperor aroused suspicion and hostility. Because they had no images of their God the Christians were labelled "atheists". Rumours about "love feasts" were complicated by additional charges of cannibalism. Christians were easy prey for Emperors like Nero for whom cruelty was a sport. Some were clad in the hides of wild

beasts and torn to death by dogs, others were crucified or set on fire to light up the night. The treatment was at times so harsh ordinary citizens felt Christians were being put to death, not for the public good, but for the love of cruelty. There was plenty in this period to equate with the terrorism of our time. There were martyrs, churches were destroyed and scriptures burned. The infant church did indeed encounter a long dark night of heavy weather. How were they to make progress in their mission? And where was their saving Lord?

Matthew shows us that although the disciples were sent out on their own they were not abandoned by Jesus. He came to them without being asked in the time of their greatest need, but not when they were expecting to see him. It was the darkest hour, when faith hope and strength were at their weakest. Mark's version of the story has it that the disciples did not have the faith to understand who had come to them. Matthew sees it differently. The disciples are people of little faith. At first they are terrified by his presence, but he speaks, their fears are allayed and they are set free. His greeting "It is I" reflects God's declaration of himself to Moses and the Prophets - a sign that he has been with God and has come from God.

Neither Mark nor John has Peter walk on water. But in Matthew Peter, the leader, feels emboldened and steps out to join Jesus in his power over the chaos. In the struggle between trusting Jesus and the strength of the opposing forces Peter falters and begins to go under. As soon as he took his eyes of Jesus he was in two minds - he doubted - and could not sustain his trust. But despite his smallness of faith, Jesus lifts him up and brings peace to the boat and his friends. And he travels with them to the next place.

There is an awful lot of grace in the story. Jesus came to them without being asked, when they least expected him. Even a little faith is enough. Even when leaders falter, Jesus lifts them up. He brought peace to the boat in the middle of the storm, and continued to travel with them. In pastoral relationships I have seen this happen. When the tears flow over seemingly endless grief a strange peace can come. When people face the trauma of a daunting operation, a deeper sense of affirmation of them selves comes to light. When lives are disrupted by huge changes, people find there is a haven in the storm.

Dare we take this on trust for our life today? We know about being afloat on the sea of life in this fragile boat the Church. And we know what it is like to have the wind against us. What changed that 50+ people gather in a building where once there used to be 1000? As the older suburbs of Melbourne regenerate and new suburbs like the Docklands and Craigieburn grow, how are congregations to go into all the world and preach the Gospel? How are people like ourselves to be the presence of Christ amongst those who don't know how to connect with the story by which we live?

The challenge put by this story is straightforward. We might think of it this way. We came into this little boat at our Baptism when we passed through the waters and commenced our journey with God. The question is, when the going gets tough, will we persevere in keeping our eye on the one who called us, sent us forth, and continues to come to us, even when we least expect it? Will we continue to believe that he is the one who even now stands above the chaos that seems ready to engulf us and that the power to bring us to safety and peace resides in Jesus. This power is present for us and we are challenged to continue to trust in its ongoing love and support. Without it we can accomplish nothing. This is true even in the case of leaders like Peter.

There are many ways in which we may find ourselves frightened or exhausted, or feeling that our faith is too small. The wind being against us may mean our family is in

trouble, or our health is failing us, or the congregation seems to be losing its focus, or the denomination appears about to be swamped, or a new effort in Mission seems just too complex. At such a time Matthew suggests there is one who comes to us to say: “Take heart, it is I.” This voice is the one, which called us to be at mission. And in him do we find the power we need to continue living out the Gospel in our time and place, to the glory of God.