

Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the joy of being able to share our faith. Thank You for others with whom we share our experiences of You; thank You for the church events at which we share what we believe; thank You for the privilege of hearing the testimony of other people's faith; and thank You for all the opportunities we have to share what we believe and everything this means to us. Lord Jesus, build us up in our faith, we pray: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Nuclear power

Nuclear power is a controversial subject, but this is why we should pray about it. Pray that God's people might be prepared to make a contribution to this important debate.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the food you eat and the God who gave it
- Pray for all those working to expose injustice in the world
- Pray for industries badly affected by recession

Meditation

The things of God are immeasurable and true:

His love is more precious to us than any gift we receive;
His grace is more awesome than any experience we may have;
His faithfulness is more consistent than the seasons of the earth;
His promises are more assured than any due processes of law;
His support is more steadfast than the foundations of a tower;
His healing is more complete than the circle of the globe;
His salvation is more secure than the safest of homes;
His future is more certain than an atomic clock;

And if we have problems, then it is us who must change.

Bible Study - Mark 6:47-56

⁴⁷ When evening came, the boat was far out to sea, and He was alone on the shore. ⁴⁸ Then He saw them straining to make way against the strong headwind, and at around the fourth watch of the night, He came to them, walking on the sea. He considered passing them by, ⁴⁹ but when they saw Him walking on the water, they thought they were seeing a ghost! They shouted out ⁵⁰ because they had all seen Him and were terrified. But Jesus spoke to them straight away and said to them, 'Courage, it is I, do not be afraid.' ⁵¹ Then He got into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were utterly astounded, ⁵² for they did not understand about the loaves and their hearts were hardened.

⁵³ When they had made the crossing, they landed at Gennesaret and tied up the boat there, ⁵⁴ and as they got out of the boat, the people recognised Jesus straight away; ⁵⁵ They ran around the whole region and began to bring those who were sick on mats to wherever they heard Jesus was. ⁵⁶ Wherever Jesus

went, in villages, cities or farms, they laid out the sick in the market-places and begged Him to let them touch even the hem of His cloak, for all who touched it were healed.

Review

This reading contains the remarkable story of Jesus' 'walking on the water', and for that reason alone, it deserves careful attention. The phrase 'walking on water' has become a proverbial expression for doing the impossible, though it is often used with considerable scepticism and little understanding of its origins. This famous story is followed immediately by another of Mark's summaries of Jesus' healing ministry (6:53-56), in which we are given the extraordinary picture of people being rapidly gathered and placed near Jesus merely to touch His clothes so they might be healed. Mark's description of this depicts the warmth and humanity of Jesus' incredible ministry.

No one can read this Gospel without being aware that it presents us with an almost constant stream of extraordinary and miraculous events. It is all beyond people's normal experience of life, whether then or now; but this is because Jesus is indeed the 'Son of God', the 'Anointed One', the 'Messiah', and His ministry was designed by God to inspire faith and bring salvation. Mark's Gospel would not make its claims that Jesus was the Messiah unless what happened was totally unique and awesome in power, and we must either account for these extraordinary events by accepting them as the record of the life of the Saviour of the world, or reject them as fantastic. People have tried to explain how Jesus walked on water, how He calmed the seas and healed through the touch of His cloak, but to no avail. In faith, we read about these things and wonder how they were possible, but far more important things occupy our minds once we cease to be worried about the details of what happened and focus on the one who did them.

If we have read Mark's Gospel from its beginning, then these two stories will make us wonder what was happening to the disciples. They had been with Jesus from the beginning, and had seen many great and wonderful things (for example, Jesus' power over the wind and the sea – 4:35f.); they were chosen (1:16-20, 2:13-17, 3:13-19), appointed and sent on mission with Jesus' full authority to preach the Gospel and cast out demons (6:6-13). However, since they came back from mission (6:30), they had failed to understand Jesus. They did not appreciate what He was doing in the feeding of the five thousand (6:37f.), and in our passage today, they panicked whilst at sea in a difficult but not dangerous situation, merely because they saw Jesus doing something else extraordinary! Had they not learned that Jesus was always doing miraculous things? Mark even says that 'their hearts were hardened' (6:52)! This is terrible comment on the disciples, and we are left to wonder how Jesus' ministry can possibly progress with the disciples in such confusion.

By contrast, the ordinary people were continuing to respond positively to Jesus and the miraculous events happening all around Him. For them, He was one who could be depended upon; if He was present, then the sick would be cured, and they had complete faith in His power even through touching His cloak (6:55-56). But the impression Mark gives us is that Jesus blessed the people by His ministry yet constantly moved on. He had compassion on the crowds and ministered to them (6:34), but Jesus came to earth to do more than that. He came to find faith on earth, something more than the desire to be healed of disease. He also needed more from the ones He had chosen to be the new Israel, the twelve who would found the 'new Israel' of the church of God. Jesus was conscious of their failings, but he never left them or rejected them. He always led them on.

These miraculous stories heightened the tension within the story of Jesus' ministry; there was so much that Jesus could do, but he only did what was necessary for the Kingdom of God. He was heading towards His ultimate destiny and the conclusion of the Gospel.

The story of Jesus' walking on the water contains many things which are not clear, but we must be careful to ensure that we make sense of them all, if possible. We need to be careful about discerning which details are important and which are secondary, so that we maintain a proper focus on the great power and authority of Jesus which is the theme of Mark's Gospel at this point.

Details of the story

If you attempt to go back through the previous chapters of Mark's Gospel, you will find that all the action has taken place around the Sea of Galilee, with occasional trips across it to reach other regions (4:35-41, 5:21, 6:1, 6:30f.). Capernaum was on the north western shore of the lake, with Genessaret just to the south west. Bethsaida, where Jesus told the disciples to go after the feeding of the five thousand was to the east of Capernaum (6:45), so it is hard to make sense of the direction of travel in this famous story.

Now, if the disciples were following Jesus' instructions, they should have been heading east towards Bethsaida, but Mark records them landing at Genessaret, further round to the West! Perhaps this is the reason for Mark's comment about a headwind, possibly blowing them in the wrong direction (6:48). Many commentators today reckon that this is of no consequence and is merely a function of Mark putting the story together without any real interest in the geographical facts. However, the geography of the region is much more our problem than Mark's, because Mark always includes geographical details in the story. We who read this passage today do not really know much about where these places are or were, but the people who first read Mark's Gospel would have known them well, as would Mark. It seems inconceivable to me that they would not have assumed that the reason why Jesus walked out on to the water to see what the disciples were doing was to check which way they were going, because in the strong winds, they were heading west to Genessaret instead of east to Bethesda!

The other difficulty with the story is the matter of time-keeping. At the beginning of the story, Mark says 'evening came' (6:47). This was only a rough time estimate however, which indicated that the sun had gone down. Clearly, the disciples had to row hard through the night, and in a storm! If that was not clear, then Mark adds that Jesus came out to them 'at around the fourth watch of the night' (6:48). Mark was clearly citing a Roman system of time-keeping that indicated around 3.00 a.m. in the morning (the Jews had only three watches for the night!). We must therefore understand that the disciples were rowing through the night, possibly in shifts, and probably not too far from land. The only way to navigate in such circumstances would be to watch for the light of the moon (possibly), and fires in villages and settlements near the shore. These would have been a vital reference point for the disciples.

These are only details. However, they help us understand that the stories were not just 'made up' for the purpose of Mark's Gospel, but they were told in the normal manner of storytelling for the day. It also means that we do not have to dismiss the story to the realms of 'fairy tale', as some try to do because they say that the details around the story do not make sense. Because the story as a whole makes sense, the focus of the story is therefore on the only part of it which appears impossible, and this is the fact the Jesus walked on the water! Moreover, the disciples were in a mess, attempting to row the boat one way (as Jesus directed) when the headwind was taking them in a different direction!

Jesus walks on water

As Jesus came out to the boat on the stormy seas (6:48), there is no question of His performing any trick along the edge of the lake, or walking over reefs. Here were stormy seas with wind driving the waves. There are plenty of references in the Old Testament to God's control of the sea, and Jesus' command of the situation was a proof of His status as

Messiah (Job 9:8, Ps 77:19, Isaiah 43:16). He had already shown this power once before (4:35-41), and we imagine that the disciples might have recalled this and realised that Jesus was coming out to them for a purpose. Yet they thought they had seen a ghost (6:49), and Jesus had to re-assure them. Misunderstandings between Jesus and the disciples had already emerged in the previous incident, when the disciples had not understood what happened as Jesus fed the 'five thousand' (6:37). Mark gave the hard yet realistic explanation that 'their hearts were hardened' (6:52) because it was true. They were called and commissioned, but they were not yet spiritually re-born and therefore able to comprehend what Jesus was doing. Their faithfulness was certainly shown by their following of Jesus, but they had not yet been released into the faith of people who were saved and had peace with God.

There is plenty of evidence that the early church saw this story as a parable of their own experience. They were not so haughty (as we might be today) to say that they were better than the disciples, and they saw themselves as like the boat, battling against misunderstanding and persecution, and it seemed as if everyone was against them. For them, the picture of Jesus coming out to the boat and not 'passing by' (6:48) but accompanying them was deeply reassuring, even though they knew they had many faults. The words, 'Courage, it is I, do not be afraid' were deeply comforting, and we can realise the extent of this by noting that the Greek words for 'it is I' can also be translated 'I am'. 'I am' is the holy name of God Himself (see Ex 3:14, Mk 13:6, 14:62, Luke 24:39, John 6:35, 8:12 etc.).

The healings at Genessaret.

In a very real way, the healing Jesus performed at Genessaret takes on a different perspective when seen in the light of the disciple's experience of Jesus walking on the water, and the misdirection of the boat. Jesus and the disciples had arrived at Genessaret when they had meant to go to Bethsaida. They did in fact go there later on the way to Caesarea Philippi (see Mark 8:22f. where Jesus healed a blind man). Perhaps Jesus' instructions to the disciples to go to Bethsaida were part of an earlier attempt to go to Caesarea Philippi, where God had important plans for Jesus and the disciples (see 8:27f. and 9:1f.), and there was more of Jesus' miraculous healing ministry yet to do in the region of the Sea of Galilee (see chapters 7 and 8). Jesus accepted the situation he found in Genessaret, and moved on from there.

To a certain extent, the scenes in Genessaret are a reminder to us of the sheer extent of the brokenness of humanity and its need of God. Genessaret was a fertile plain south west of Capernaum, sweeping for several miles down to the sea, and fairly heavily populated in Jesus' day with small towns, villages and farms. This is the picture in Mark 6:55, and it is the picture we find in records of the day (which is another reason to be more trustful of Mark's geography and general sense of correctness in story telling than he is given credit for by some). The scenes of people lain in the streets and market places awaiting a touch of Jesus' cloak must have been heart rending. The story implies that the quantity of sick people was enormous. Here, however, Jesus' compassion is not offered individually, but shared out equally. Mark gives no hints that anyone could obtain favour or merit from attachment to Jesus and His extraordinary ministry. All that anyone had to do was touch His cloak.

Application

Whilst we can now claim peace with God the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord, all of us must accept that we are sometimes ignorant of God's will and 'hardened' to what He requires of us, just like the disciples in this story. None of us are perfect. Therefore, like the Christians of the early church, we can identify with the disciples rowing hard against a wind which either is or appears to be blowing them in the wrong direction. However, Jesus

was in control of the disciple's situation, He was in control of the life of the early church, and He is in control of our lives. It may not seem as if this is so, especially if we have some aim in sight which is not being achieved (see comments on Caesarea Philippi above). This must surely be the toughest call for any one of us; to hold firm in God's promises for the future, even though the present does not appear to give us hope that things are moving in the right direction. Jesus is always there, perhaps passing us by, sometimes demonstrating His presence just as He got into the boat with the disciples. We may even mistake Jesus for something we do not understand and dismiss Him (just as the disciples dismissed Him as a ghost! – 6:49). But He still speaks the same words to us, 'Courage, it is I, do not be afraid.' So despite our sin and our imperfection, we may know that Christ saves us.

Nevertheless, we will sometimes find ourselves in a place where we have not expected to be; but God does not call us to do that for which we are not prepared. The disciples had been commissioned to heal and cast out demons, and although people reached for the hem of Jesus' cloak, we can expect that they would have been active on the edge of things, working in healing and deliverance together with Jesus. In just the same way, we should be active in whatever form of ministry God has given us, and in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Have you had any experience in which Jesus has 'come' to you in unexpected or perhaps miraculous ways?
2. Discuss in your group what Mark may have meant by the phrase 'they did not understand about the loaves' (6:52).
3. Why were people brought on mats and touched Jesus' cloak (2:1-12 and 5:24-34), and how do people reach out for the love of God today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The story of Jesus' walking on the water has challenged people for centuries. It is like a test of faith that is not a solitary experience but a shared one; we tend to see faith as something tested individually, but it is often shared. The faith of God's people as a whole has been tested by centuries of questioning and in some case doubt about its veracity, particularly when reflecting on incidents like this. Despite such questioning, the church has come through strongly not with explanations, but faith to believe that God sometimes does work in the world in miraculous ways. We cannot ignore that testimony, and neither can the world.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Reflect on what 'tests of faith' you may be experiencing in your church just now, for example. Make a note of some of these and resolve to talk to others at your church about them. You may be able to overcome them together.*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to accept that miracles happen. Pray that God will show such people the miracles of life lying at the heart of human experience, and lead them on to see the greater miracle of salvation through Christ.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, You are worthy of our greatest praise! We give you glory for the wonderful things You have done for us, and we can barely wait for all You have for us to do next.