

Reading: Matthew 14:22-33

As any grandparent will tell you, the first few steps we take are so special. Like any self-respecting grandparents Rosemary and I have about a thousand hours of video of Abby's first steps (along with her first tooth, hair, smile, and words). When Abby, and our own children for that matter, first learned to walk, it was really interesting to notice how holding a hand makes all the difference.

Our first steps in faith are very similar. When we can place our hand in the hand of Jesus it makes all the difference.

And so, it was for Peter. Matthew gives us all the details we need to paint the scene in our minds' eye. The setting is the sea of Galilee, and being surrounded by steep mountain valleys, the wind gets funneled, much like it does in our mountain lakes, Lake Coleridge for example. The waves are getting higher. The phrase "early in the morning" refers to the last few hours of the night so it's about 3 in the morning.

Peter is this impulsive, enthusiastic, and deeply ordinary person, much like you and me. He doesn't lack faith, but his faith is pretty flaky. He swings between devotion and disaster. Again, in this he is like you and me.

But this time he literally goes overboard. Seeing Jesus walking on water he gets out of the boat and attempts to follow him. He starts off alright but seeing the waves and hearing the wind, he starts to get that sinking feeling. Just as he is about to go under, Jesus reaches out his hand and rescues him with the words "Do not be afraid."

The reader is reminded of the passage from Isaiah 43. "Fear not, you are mine. When you pass through the deep waters, I shall be with you."

What are we to make of this Bible passage and most importantly what difference does it make for our lives?

Firstly, Jesus is with us in the storms of our lives. We are naive if we think being a Christian immunises us against storms. You might be facing a storm right now in your life. Maybe you are seeking God's direction for your life. Maybe a close relationship has broken up, or you face illness or maybe you have lost your job, or the mortgage is just too much. Be assured Jesus is right there with you. Fear not, you are mine. When you pass through the deep waters, I shall be with you.

Elijah was utterly burnt out. All the other prophets of God had been killed and now he faced death too. He was utterly spent. He went to the mouth of the cave, and the wind of the storm was so strong it was breaking open rocks, but God was not in the wind, then an earthquake hit but God was not in the earthquake, then a sound, and translations vary at

this point, but something like the sound of sheer silence enveloped the place, and God was in the silence. Then Elijah knew God was with him, he pulled up his mantle and he was renewed to carry on.

There is a saying that God's first language is silence. We build resilience when we listen to God carefully in the silence. That's exactly what we do each Friday morning at mediation.

Secondly when we are taking our first steps in faith then, much like baby taking its first steps, we need to put our hand in the hand of Jesus. To allow him to hold us, to lead us, to strengthen us.

There's an old song that goes like this:

Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the waters.

Am D G

Put your hand in the hand of the man who calmed the sea.

G7 C

Take a look at yourself and you can look at the others differently.

G E A D G

By putting your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee

Lastly, with Jesus leading us we can do the seemingly impossible.

Nelson Mandela is credited with saying, "The impossible always seems impossible until it's done." Certainly, dismantling apartheid without a civil war in South Africa seemed impossible.

Today in our Gospel, Peter is setting out to walk on water. Certainly, if anything seems impossible, it's got to be walking on water! Seeing the waves around him, Peter begins to lose his nerve and sink below the water. Jesus reaches out his hand and pulls him up.

When we set out to rebuild St Peter's Church, many said it was impossible. It certainly felt impossible at times. The enormous sums of money. Trying to get agreement between all the stakeholders. Finding the right teams with the right skills: masonry, organ rebuilding, stained glass etc. It would have been easy to sink below the waves.

The next seemingly impossible task is to fill the new church! The seemingly impossible task before us is to make new Christians.

Like rebuilding the church physically, rebuilding the church with new people is going to take courage, it's going to take vision, it's going to take putting our hand into Jesus' and being held and led and guided by him.

This is the most urgent task that faces us as church - to find and nurture new Christians. We used to operate under the Christendom paradigm. That is the idea that everyone in the community was a Christian and so all we needed to do to grow and green the church was to have really good worship and then the people would come. Today, of course, many have no idea who Jesus is, have never read the Bible and know nothing of God's love for them. But trust me, this is a good thing. It's easier to start with a clean slate than having half pie ideas about God. Many young people are fascinated about God, they want to hear more. If only we were ready to tell them.

This is the motivation of the growing in faith group that Peg is running. It is a place to explore faith and take those first steps with her guiding hand. The LYCIG course, we have 3½ of them operating and I would love to see many more start up.

So what have we learned?

Well as it turns out, we have learned heaps.

Jesus is always with us in the storms of life. We can find him especially in the still small voice of prayer. As we take our first steps (and our hundredth ...) in faith we need to rest our hand in Jesus' hand because he will hold us up. Lastly, what seems impossible, even reaching out to renew our congregation, we can do with Jesus at our side holding our hands.