**Pastoral Letter – Trinity 9**

**Our Gospel reading today is Matthew 14: 22-33**

Last Sunday evening I made the comment that whenever the Bible contains a story about water or a boat we ought to take notice. Water is often a sign that the journey is about to take a different direction. Genesis opens with the Spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters. The people of Israel pass through the waters of the Red Sea, on one side they are slaves pursued by soldiers, on the other side they are free. Later they come to the River Jordan, on one side they are homeless refugees, on the other they are people with a land.

Baptism is of course a passing through water, originally done at the river, and rivers were always a boundary between here and somewhere else. Turning points in the story of Jesus are often marked by crossing water. Sometimes boats are involved, I think boat stories point us towards different perspectives.

The story of Jesus walking on water is one of the best known but perhaps least understood of boat stories. We find it in Matthew, Mark and John. Our reading today ends at verse 33, I think it ought to go a little bit further and include verse 34, “And when they had crossed over they came to land.” Mark also records that the boat came to land. John is more specific, he says that when Jesus had got into the boat “immediately they were at the land to which they were going.”

William Barclay makes the point that if we want to understand miracle stories we need to regard then not as something that happened but as something that happens.

All three accounts agree that this story immediately follows the feeding of the multitude. People thought Jesus was a great guy, free food, all your problems solved. They misunderstood who he was. Jesus needs to withdraw from that popularity moment and keep his friends from getting drawn into it. So he sends them off in the boat and goes off by himself to pray.

We are told it was a difficult crossing. The wind got up, the waves were against them. The boat was being battered by a storm. Near dawn the disciples spot Jesus coming towards them. Now you can play words with the original Greek because the same words that can mean walking on the water can also mean walking towards the water. When John tells us that Jesus reached the boat he then tells us that the boat immediately reached the land.

So you have to decide, is the miracle that Jesus can walk on water? Or is the miracle that Jesus comes to his friends when they are battered and afraid, that he wades into the surf to grab the storm tossed boat and drags them to shore?

The text can be read both ways, but I find myself reminded of Barclay’s advice, miracles are not something that happened, miracles of things which happen. Jesus being able to defy the laws of physics might be interesting, but for me there is more hope in Jesus who walks towards his friends when their lives are battered by headwinds and tossed by waves.

In these continuing difficult times, and frankly things seem to be getting worse rather than better right now, how do we read this story? What does it tell us about God?

That God can rewrite gravity and the surface tension of water is doubtless true but I’m not sure it tells us anything really important. That God chooses to come nearer to those battered by life means something. And if that is what Jesus is telling us then right now that this story is significant.