

Keep Your Eyes on the Ball

Those of us who have played football or rugby at any level, will have heard our coach shouting, *keep your eye on the ball*. When we are distracted by the silky manoeuvres of our opponents, our attention is drawn away from the ball and onto the opponent, at that moment he or she has us beaten.

This is a metaphor for all events in life, keep your eye on the ball, or keep your focus on the important thing.

In our Gospel reading today, Peter sinks beneath the waves, because he lost his focus. He took his focus off Jesus.

This message was first heard by Matthew's church. It was written 30 years after the death of Jesus as Matthew compiled the stories and teachings of Jesus.

The Church was struggling in its new world. The opponents were many. So this story that Matthew tells of Jesus and his disciples was apt for Matthew's Church and if we are honest, it is apt for every Church, especially in our secular world today.

The boat is the Church, and as followers of Jesus we are all in the boat. The storm represents the challenges and difficulties that the Church faces; the disciples had been rowing into the face of the storm for many hours now. It was tough work. They were exhausted. They were frightened. But they were about to learn how important it is to trust Jesus in the storm. This is what this story is about.

We learn from this story that Jesus sees them from a distance, from his place of prayer on the hillside, and he comes to their rescue. To Matthew's Church this was a reminder that Jesus was with them even when he seems to be absent. He has his eye on them, all be it, from a distance. He sees their effort and he saw their difficulties. He is praying for them on the hillside above the storm.

Jesus saw from his vantage point of the hills of Galilee down onto Lake Galilee and he made his way to the disciples to bring them help. He allowed them to struggle and in doing so, he was testing their faith.

This story reminds us that we are not on our own. The Church belongs to God. Christ is the head of the Church, and so we need not struggle all on our own. Take comfort from the fact, that Jesus is in Heaven praying for us right now. He brings our petitions to his Father.

God willing, at the end of November, I hope to go on a trip with 26 other people from the CofS, URC and Methodist Church; we are going to Palestine and Israel to visit our Church partners and organisations working in the name of Jesus. I know a number of you have been to the Holy Land; one of the things I'm really looking forward to seeing is Lake Galilee and the hills surrounding it where Jesus went to pray often. He was drawn to the hills, as was the psalmist, "I to the hills will lift my eyes from whence doth come my strength." It's in the hills that he is drawn to prayer.

But after his time of prayer, he leaves his sanctuary in the hills and goes down to the struggling disciples. He walks on water to them, they are terrified, they think it's a ghost! Perhaps to their first century minds, some evil spirit arising from the depths of the sea!

But Jesus immediately calms their fears, "Take courage! It is I! Don't be afraid!" The time has come, and Jesus is revealing who he is, the Son of God, who is master, even of the sea. He comes walking and talking, he comes to strengthen and reassure them, that they are not alone.

Peter, the disciple who always put his big number 9's into everything, is suddenly emboldened when he shouts out to Jesus. "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." Peter's focused faith in Jesus' true identity enables him to overcome his fear, to call out to him, and he recognises that Jesus can enable him to do the impossible, and to walk over water. No human can do this! It's simply not possible. But for that moment in time, Peter was so absorbed with Jesus, that nothing would deter him from not going to him.

"Come Peter!" and Peter takes a few faltering steps, his eyes are fixed on Jesus, and here we see another valuable point that Matthew makes in his story, when our eyes are fixed on Jesus, there are no limits to what we can do. When we get out of the comfort of our boat, out of the safety of our church, and look to Jesus, great things can and will happen.

Peter believed in the power of Jesus, as he made his faltering steps on the water. Can you imagine the astonishment on the disciples' faces as Peter treads water.

Like a child learning to swim, and their focus is on their dad, a few yards away, who tells them to come, perhaps you've been there, and with all your might you start doing the doggie paddle, and as long as you can see your Dad, you

will keep going, but the moment you're distracted and the moment that you look away from your Dad, down you go, like a brick!

Peter noticed the strong wind; he was afraid and started to sink down in the water. "Save me, Lord he cried!"

This picture of Peter is a picture of many people, who have got out of their boats, out of their comfort zones and who have sunk.

But if the story were to finish there, then there would be no hope for anyone. At once, Jesus reached out and grabbed hold of him...Isn't that wonderful. What a beautiful picture to have in our minds, the hand of Jesus, reaching down below the waves and grabbing Peter and lifting him up and onto the boat.

Perhaps this morning, you may feel a bit like Peter, sinking. Sinking under the waves. It may take different forms, it may be physical, spiritual, mental, there are many ways that we can sink and we flounder and we lose sight of God and all hope seems to be gone. I meet regularly with people who are sinking. It's sad to see, especially for folks who are well on in life, yet they feel lost and lonely. They feel like they are in the midst of the storm and they are sinking.

If you feel this way, remember this story, because this story is for you, at that moment of feeling everything has gone, Peter shouted out, "Jesus, save me!"

It worked for Peter, it has worked for countless people down through history, three simple words, *Jesus save me!* And Jesus sees, hears, and will rescue you and bring you up onto a safe place.

There is a story told about a large boat became shipwrecked, and there was only a single survivor. This man prayed and asked God to save his life and rescue him. Soon thereafter, another boat came by and offered the man some help.

"No thanks," he said. "I'm waiting for God to save me."

The men on the boat shrugged their shoulders and continued. As the man became more deeply concerned, another boat came by. Again, the people aboard offered this man some help, and again he politely declined. "I'm waiting for God to save me," he said again, and the same thing happened a third time, this time with a helicopter. "No", he said, "I'm waiting for God to save me."

After some time the man died, upon reaching Heaven, he had an opportunity to speak with God.

“God, why did you let me die? Why didn't you answer my prayers?”

God said, “You foolish man, I sent you two boats and a helicopter and you refused them both!”

Yes, we need to receive God's offer of help, and it may come in a way that we don't expect it. But what we do know, is that God sent his Son Jesus into the world to save the lost and the truth is we are all lost and in need of being saved.

Saved from fear, saved from loneliness, saved from guilt, saved from sin, saved even from ourselves. We all need to be saved. We all need that helping hand to lift us up.

God sent his son Jesus to die on a cross, that our sins might be forgiven, and Jesus rose to eternal life that we might know Heaven.

So, this wonderful story in Matthew's Gospel, reminds us that we have a Saviour, we have a friend in Jesus, who will not let us sink beneath the waves, but who comes to us in the storm, and invites us to focus upon him and to trust him, despite the storm and the waves. “Do not be afraid”, Jesus said, “It is I”.

As we share in communion today, Come, to Jesus today, and grasp his hand, as he stretches out to you, and allow him to hold you, and to lift you into the safety of his boat.

Amen.