



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

## OXFORD

**9 August 2020: Sunday Worship**

**The Ninth Sunday after Trinity**

**Romans 10:5–15; Matthew 14:22–33**

**The Revd Canon Professor Sarah Foot, Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History**

+ ‘Immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”’ (Matthew 14: 27)

Everyone knows the story of Jesus walking on the water. It is one of the most famous of Jesus’ miracle stories, if not the most popular. (That distinction, according to Bishop Steven, goes to the story of the feeding of the five thousand which we heard last Sunday.) So straightforward a message does the tale convey, and so vivid are the images that its retelling calls to mind, that we often teach it to children as a readily accessible example of Jesus’ deeds of power. Variants of the phrase – ‘he acts like he can walk on water’ – have entered popular parlance and are often the subject of contemporary political jokes.

Yet I must admit that I find this story extremely difficult. Are we really supposed to believe that Jesus, having been praying alone on the mountain through the night, set off to walk across the waters of the lake like some modern-day superhero? Of course, Jesus was the Son of God. At the end of the story, the disciples, having recognised this, proclaimed him in those words. Should we see Matthew’s account as depicting a divine Jesus acting like other gods of the ancient world who walked on the water such as Neptune in the *Aeneid* (1: 147), or Hermes who, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, rode ‘on the multitudinous waves’ (*Odyssey*, 5: 54). The danger of assuming that Jesus was this sort of a god, is that we fall into Docetism, the gnostic doctrine that maintained that Jesus’ human form was either entirely illusory, or of a real, but heavenly substance. We are getting close to denying Jesus’ humanity. But if Jesus were fully human, how on earth could he have walked on the water? He should have sunk, just as Peter started to do until Jesus reached out a hand to save him.

It is helpful here to recall words that Jesus spoke in St John’s gospel: ‘Very truly, I tell you the Son can do nothing on his own’; in that passage, he made clear his utter dependence on the Father for

all his divine works. We might better understand walking on the water as a miracle that God performed for Jesus, rather than as a divine act performed by Jesus unaided. As one commentator has noted, ‘the fact that walking on the sea is evidence of divine empowerment, not of divinity itself, is sufficiently demonstrated by the fact that Peter is empowered to do the same.’ Peter took several steps across the water towards Jesus, until he became frightened and started to sink.

Focusing too literally on who did – and didn’t – succeed in walking effortlessly on the surface of the stormy waves means that we lose sight of what this two-act miracle story was really about. The climax comes at the heart of the story: the moment when Jesus disproved the disciples’ assumption that the figure they had seen on the water was a ghost, by announcing himself in words heavy with Old Testament resonance: ‘It is I’; in Greek *ego eimi*: ‘I am’.

In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the seventy books of the Hebrew scriptures, these were the words that God used when he revealed himself to Moses in the Burning Bush. Moses asked, ‘What should I say to the Israelites when they ask, what is the name of the God of our ancestors?’ And Yahweh answered: ‘I am who I am’; *ego eimi*. In using the divine name of himself, Jesus was doing more than announcing his presence among the disciples and banishing their foolish thought of ghosts. He told them who he was. This is a theophany (a divine revelation), comparable with other occasions in the gospels where Jesus’ true identity was revealed.

Most immediately, I think in this context of the Transfiguration, the occasion when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain top, becoming radiant in glory. Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with him, and the voice from heaven declared Jesus to be his Son, telling the disciples, ‘Listen to him’ (Matthew 17: 1-13; Mark 9: 2-23; Luke 9: 28-36). We could also call to mind the first Christophany that Matthew provided, the moment of his baptism when, as Jesus came up from the waters, the heavens were opened, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and the voice declared: ‘This is my son the beloved, in whom I am well pleased.’ (Matthew 3: 16-17)

On today’s occasion, God did not speak for Jesus. Jesus spoke for himself, in his Father’s words. Using the divine name, Jesus identified himself directly with God, not just the liberator and redeemer of Israel, but the creator of the world, the one who conquered the chaos, sweeping over the face of waters (Genesis 1: 1-2). At several points in the Old Testament, God was depicted triumphing over the waters (for example to enable the Israelites to cross the Red Sea and then the Jordan); now Jesus does likewise. In walking on the water, Jesus was behaving like God who, in Job’s words, trampled on the waves of the sea (Job 8: 9; 38: 16; cf. Hab 3: 15). The Psalmist wrote of God’s power to save from the floods and mighty waters (Ps 69: 2; 144: 7). In

stilling the storm, Jesus behaved like the God of Psalm 107 (v29): 'he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed'.

Yet more powerful is the link between divine authority over the waves and the injunction 'do not be afraid'. Jesus speaks as the God of Isaiah, who frequently linked statements of self-revelation with advice not to fear. On one such occasion he made a connection with authority over the waters: 'Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.' (Isaiah 43: 1-2). The revelation of God's majesty then – and here on the surface of the lake – is intended not to terrify and subdue but to save, uphold, and ultimately redeem.

For the disciples (observing the drama between Jesus and Peter from the safety of the boat) the manifestation of Christ's divinity was sufficient for them to declare: 'Truly you are the Son of God.' For us, the significance of this theophany lies in the promise it conveys that Jesus will always be with us. God can and does call us to do things that feel frightening and unmanageable; he sends us out into uncharted waters. But this story reassures us that he will not abandon us. Whatever storms we may encounter in life – and right now we all feel as if we are in the midst of unmanageable tumult and uncertainty, in real danger of drowning beneath the waves – he will be with us. The God who said through Isaiah, 'Do not fear for I have redeemed you; ... when you walk through the waters I will be with you' is the same God whose Son Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, is present here among us in word and sacrament, walking across earth and water ready to reach out his hand and save each of us, however small our faith.