

Sermon for Proper 14A

The Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Dear heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit on us so when facing storms in our life, we may have courage and not be afraid knowing your Son Jesus Christ is with us. Amen.

There are some things you *can* do.

There are some things you *can't* do.

And sometimes they're the same thing!

Now, before you think I'm talking in riddles (and perhaps I am), I'd like you to think how many times Jesus tells his disciples to do things they shouldn't be able to do. And then, even if they should be able to do what he asks, they often fail in their task.

For example, just before today's reading Jesus asked the disciples to feed five thousand men (plus women and children). The disciples naturally complained they didn't have enough to feed them. It's too hard. They can't do it. It seems they failed Jesus' test.

But in the next moment, Jesus blessed a small pile of bread and fish, gave it to the disciples to distribute it (after all, he told *them* to feed the people), and after everyone was fed, there were still twelve baskets of left-over food.

This is amazing! Miraculous! Unbelievable! Even though they *couldn't* do it, with Jesus' help, they *did* it!

Then, in today's text (which comes immediately after the miraculous feeding of the five thousand), Jesus told them to cross over to the other side of the lake by boat while Jesus said goodbye to the crowds and went off by himself to pray.

But during the night the winds and waves came to torment his disciples while they were in the middle of the lake. Here in the dark they're alone, afraid, and tortured by the scary and chaotic storm. Then, to top it off, just when they didn't think it could get any worse, Jesus walks toward them on the water!

Now, before you criticise the disciples' frightened reaction when they saw Jesus, what would you think?

I mean, if you've been taught your whole life to be afraid of the sea because it's a chaotic place filled with pagan gods and demons and evil spirits, and you believe you're under demonic attack by these chaotic winds and waves this whole night, and then, you see a man walking toward you on those waves, what do you think your reaction would be like?

Maybe you'd squeal like frightened little girls like they did! They thought Jesus was a ghost or a phantom walking toward them to finish them off!

But then Jesus spoke to them. The words he spoke are good to memorise and paste on your walls at home.

Unfortunately, the words he spoke are often watered down a little in our translations. Literally, Jesus says something like: '*Be encouraged*' as if he's commanding courage to fill their frightened hearts so they can stand firm in the face of evil and chaos. We too wouldn't mind a bit of courage to stand firm in the face of persecutions and struggles at times.

He also says: '*I am*', echoing the holy name of God of '*I AM WHO I AM*' as once announced to a frightened Moses before he led the Israelites out of Egypt. This is the same '*I Am*' who is the Bread of Life, the Light of the world, the Good Shepherd, and the Way, the Truth, and the Life. This is the One who says '*I Am with you to the end of the age*' at our baptism.

And then he says: '*Don't be afraid*' as if to order their fear to stop, just like he soon orders the wind and the waves to stop.

Wouldn't it be good to not be afraid of what people think, or to not be afraid of failing, or to not be afraid of what people will say or do to us, or to not be afraid of the troubles we face in life, or to not be afraid of sickness or death?

So, in their distress Jesus tells them: '*Be encouraged! I am! Don't be afraid!*' These words are a *command*, an *assurance*, and a *promise* of salvation despite the storm.

Now, coming back to doing what we can and can't do at the same time, Peter has the nerve to ask Jesus to command him to go toward Jesus on the water, thereby doing what only Jesus as Lord of heaven and earth could do.

Now, you'd think this is something Peter can't do. Even though Jesus seemed to defy the laws of nature, a human can't walk on water!

Yet Jesus gave him a simple command: '*Come!*'

Amazingly, miraculously, and unbelievably, Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus! He shouldn't be able to do it, but he was doing it! Wouldn't you have loved to see the faces of the other disciples!

But again, we *can't* do what we *can* do. Peter is soon distracted by the wind and sinks. He calls out for Jesus to save him as the chaotic sea begins to swallow him up. Jesus reaches out his hand and saves Peter before commenting on his little faith and doubt.

In a sense, Peter is a symbol of all believers.

You see, we're at the same time we're full of faith *and* unfaith. We can both do wonderful things, yet we also completely fail at times. We can love exceedingly generously and graciously, and yet we can viciously hate and abuse each other. We

can be incredibly selfless and yet be extraordinarily selfish. We can be filled with hope and joy and yet flounder in the despairing depths of hopelessness. Even the strongest person of faith will also experience times of doubt and fear.

Therefore, the cry of Peter to Jesus: 'Lord, save me!' is the cry of both the strong disciple who can do miraculous things, as well as the miserable sinner who struggles with doubt, despair, and confusion.

We cry out to Jesus as the only One who can save us from sin, from the devil, and from death itself. Even when we can't reach out to him (because it's something we both can and can't do for ourselves), he's the One who reaches out to us. In this way, instead of us being able to cling to him, he's the One who clings to us and holds us safe.

In our world today there are many things which torment us in the storms of life and faith. We need his encouragement, the assurance of his presence, and for him to calm our fears.

The storms we face (which often make us afraid) could come in the forms of school studies or excessive workloads. It could come from peer pressure or bullying. It could come from unrealistic expectations of ourselves or from those around us. It could be the upheaval from changes in our circumstances.

It could also be struggles with family, friends, or even church members. It could be coping with human frailty as we get older and fear being a burden on others. It could be political or economic struggles as we face the storms of dissent or deception as we make a stand for God's view of marriage or gender over public opinion. It could even be the inevitable storm of death – either our own or one of our loved ones.

All the time we may struggle with what we *can* and *can't* do.

While we all know we can look to Jesus Christ alone for strength, for hope, for life and salvation, we struggle to do this. It's both something we can and can't do!

Every time we attempt to keep our attention firmly fixed on Jesus Christ alone by our own powers, we find ourselves distracted by all the fears and problems of this world. In some ways, fear drives us to Jesus, but fear can also drive us away from him.

Now, of course we can always pray that God would take our storms away so we could live in peace and harmony now and into eternity, but he doesn't always do so.

While the winds did die down when Jesus got into the boat, the storm was still raging while Jesus and Peter walked on the water. God also chose not to remove the storm of the cross from Jesus either. Jesus walked through the storms of apathy, ignorance, abuse, whippings, beard pulling, and death in order to give us forgiveness, peace and life.

While God doesn't always take the storms away, he promises to be with us *in* those storms. As we face the waves of hostility, the winds of guilt and shame, the howls of

health problems, and even the final storm of death, Jesus calls out to each of us: 'Be encouraged! I am! Don't be afraid!'

The great 'I AM' of the Old Testament is here with us. Just like he was with those troubled people of the past who both could and couldn't do what was required of them, he is also with us.

By ourselves we can't survive the storms of life without fear, or have faith in a loving God who allows trouble to visit us, or even love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind or strength. You can't do it. I can't do it. It's impossible.

But Jesus comes near to give us courage to endure those storms. Not only this, but through faith he empowers us through his Spirit to do what we can't do by ourselves.

Jesus comes near to assure us the 'I AM WHO I AM'; the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and Elijah; is here with us and won't let us face our battles alone.

He comes near so that, even if the storms rage around us, we're no longer afraid of them. Even if we feel ourselves flounder, Jesus is the one who reaches out to save us and restore us through his forgiveness, grace, mercy, peace, and life.

While we *can't* cope and do all these things alone, with God's help we *can*. We *can* endure courageously. We *can* have faith. We *can* have peace and hope in the face of life's storms and evil and death.

Yes, there are many times we'll feel we *can't* live by faith alone, and those storms will blow fiercely and we'll be afraid, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, who is the presence of the living Lord Jesus, we *can* endure. It's something we both can and can't do at the same time.

Therefore, no matter what storms any of us are facing at this time, let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Let's be encouraged. The 'I AM' is with us. Don't be afraid.

And it's in this way that the peace of God, which surpasses all human, will continue to guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.