

Year A

Matthew 14:22-33

At the Seafest Songs of Praise service held in the marquee in Lossiemouth at the beginning of July, I was struck by the number of people who made reference to the joy of living so close to the sea and then immediately qualified their comments by reminding us of the sea's danger.

His Majesty's Yacht *Iolaire* was carrying sailors who had fought in the First World War back to the Scottish island of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. She left the port of Kyle

of Lochalsh on the mainland late on the evening of 31 December 1918. At 2:30 a.m. on New Year's Day, as the ship approached the port of Stornoway, a few yards offshore and a mile away from the safety of Stornoway Harbour, she hit the infamous rocks "The Beasts of Holm" and sank. The death toll was officially put at 205, of whom 181 men were islanders but as the ship was badly overcrowded and there was a lack of proper records, the toll could have been slightly higher. John F. Macleod from Ness, Isle of Lewis, saved 40 lives, swimming ashore with a heaving line, along which

many of the survivors made their way to safety. Only 75 of the 280 (officially known) passengers survived the disaster; 73 percent of the people on the yacht perished in the incident.

The sailors were wearing their uniforms including heavy boots, which made swimming from the wreck difficult — indeed many men of that time had never had the opportunity to learn. Many songs and poems, such as *An Iolaire*, describe the women of these men finding their men washed up on the shore the next day. The sinking is the worst maritime disaster (for

loss of life) in United Kingdom waters in peacetime, since the wreck of the SS Norge off Rockall in 1904 and the worst peacetime disaster involving a British ship since the Titanic on 15 April 1912.¹

The war was over and the men were agonisingly close to home, and the sea claimed them. All the speakers at Seafest were absolutely right to qualify their remarks about the sea and any Jew of Jesus' day would have wholeheartedly agreed. Jesus has moved from the wilderness feeding of the five thousand to the stormy waters of the sea

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMY_Iolaire

via the privacy of a mountain top prayer encounter. Both the wilderness and the sea have played an important part in Israel's history. Remember at the beginning of the book of Genesis we find a remarkable account of the creation of the world. We are told that 'darkness was over the surface of the deep' and 'the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters'. In the midst of the threat of the water God brought his creative power to bear. Remember the importance of water as God's means of judging the world at the time of Noah. It was the water that destroyed life. Remember the importance of water as the

people of Israel crossed the Red Sea and God brought the waters down upon the pursuing Egyptian army. It was the water that destroyed life. Remember the people of Israel crossing the Jordan river to find the promised land. Unless they were willing to go down into the water and come through the other side they could not enter; a kind of trial by water. Such was the Jewish mistrust and fear of deep waters that Revelation 21:1 stated that in the new creation there would no longer be any sea.

Remember that Jesus had sent his disciples out into hostile territory. They were to sit no

longer under Caesar's rule; the one who was trying to thwart God's plans. They had to go out into the desert; they had to go out into the deep waters and that was a terrifying prospect. Look at the fear words we find in our Gospel text today. The phrases 'terrified', 'cried in fear', 'do not be afraid' and 'became frightened' all occur in just eleven verses! The threat is so serious it called for a serious intervention and that's what it got.

Jesus had done all his praying by the time he arrived walking on the water. Maybe there is a lesson for us in that. How often do we leave our prayers to the moment when we

can see no way out? Jesus was prepared because he had taken the time to settle himself; to do business with his heavenly Father and so there was no fear for him.

The big question that hangs over Jesus' miraculous intervention is what sort of man is this? God created the world from a mastery of the watery deeps. Jesus was creating his new world, the kingdom of heaven, from a mastery of the watery deeps. When he arrived at the boat he announced himself with two short words in Greek. "I am". That was all but there was a lot loaded into those two words. "I am" was the Greek

translation for the personal name of God found in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus as master of the waves was announcing himself as nothing short of God, present personally with them. Only God has creative power over the sea. Only God could perform this miracle.

Peter had understood one important principle from Jesus' teaching. He hadn't understood everything, that is clear, but he had understood that living the Christian life involves following Jesus' Christ. Yes, actually going where Jesus goes. So it was perfectly natural for Peter to confirm Jesus' identity by following him out of the boat and

onto the water. But it didn't get any easier for him! Sometimes the Lord calms the storm. Sometimes he lets the storm rage and calms his child. That's ultimately what this was about. I don't think there was any rebuke intended for Peter here. It took great courage for Peter to step out of the boat and walk on the water towards Jesus.

Bruce Larson wrote of his memories of attending church as a young boy. "When I was a small boy, I attended church every Sunday at a big Gothic Presbyterian bastion in Chicago. The preaching was powerful and the music was great. But for me, the most

awesome moment in the morning service was the offertory, when twelve solemn, frock-coated ushers marched in lock-step down the main aisle to receive the brass plates for collecting the offering. These men, so serious about their business of serving the Lord in this magnificent house of worship, were the business and professional leaders of Chicago. One of the twelve ushers was a man named Frank Loesch. He was not a very imposing looking man, but in Chicago he was a living legend, for he was the man who had stood up to Al Capone. In the prohibition years, Capone's rule was absolute. The local

and state police and even the Federal Bureau of Investigation were afraid to oppose him. But single handedly, Frank Loesch, as a Christian layman and without any government support, organised the Chicago Crime Commission, a group of citizens who were determined to take Mr. Capone to court and put him away. During the months that the Crime Commission met, Frank Loesch's life was in constant danger. There were threats on the lives of his family and friends. But he never wavered. Ultimately he won the case against Capone and was the instrument for removing this blight from the city of

Chicago. Frank Loesch had risked his life to live out his faith. Each Sunday at this point of the service, my father, a Chicago businessman himself, never failed to poke me and silently point to Frank Loesch with pride. Sometime I'd catch a tear in my father's eye. For my dad and for all of us this was and is what authentic living is all about.”²

Courage and conviction which goes well beyond our words is very important. Such courage is to be commended and what a difference it made to the others in the boat.

² Larson, Bruce in Charles Swindoll, 1987 *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity*, p.124-5.

They speak with one voice, “truly you are the Son of God”. The actions of a true disciple doing his very best, as flawed as it was, made all the difference in the world to the others. Your faith in action today can have a similar effect. We need one another in order that we would be inspired to follow Christ all the better.