

Seven signs from John's Gospel – 6 Jesus walks on water

For a number of weeks now we have been exploring what is usually called the seven signs in John's gospel. To recap these are miracles that John has recorded to reveal to his readers who Jesus really is.

John is relatively sparing and selective in his choice of miracles. Although he does tell us...

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe [or may continue to believe] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

As we have heard already, with these seven signs we have to do a bit of work ourselves, asking questions, thinking about what is in the background..

Maybe I can stimulate your thought with a cartoon.

Punchline: "Remember Henderson – The difference between 'walking on water' and 'treading on thin ice' is a matter of just one degree!"

Last Sunday evening at Oasis Café Church, Sue pulled together the story of Easter Day as recorded in the individual gospels and brought us a detailed picture of all the different characters and places involved and the to-ing and fro-ing and giving us a much better holistic view of the events of that day. This morning I want to take a leaf out of Sue's book and when we look at John's narration of this miracle, I'd like to pull in some of the pieces of the picture provided by both Matthew and Mark in their accounts. Luke doesn't record it.

It is useful to have some context for this. So I'm going to have to take you back a few verses in chapter 6. Jesus has just fed the 5000 men (plus women and children!) now that is another of John's signs and you would have been well versed in it but for good reason Alan Spence used a different text a few weeks ago and so you will have to wait until August to hear more about the 5000 when there will be a series on the general topic of Meals with Jesus.

At the end there is a tense situation –

¹⁴ After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.' ¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

Jesus diffuses the situation and goes to pray, leaving the disciples alone. Perhaps he can see that if he was still there, his disciples might be in danger of getting caught up in the crowd's fervour.

And now we move into the narrative of the miracle.

This is the shortest story of the 7 public miracles that John records. It is short in part because Jesus does not explain the symbolism. This is in contrast to the previous feeding

miracle, for the rest of this long chapter is dedicated to Jesus' explanation of the feeding of the 5000 and the Bread of Life.

¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷ where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them.

They must have been under instructions from Jesus

There is no hint that they had been disobedient to go off on their own. He had probably indicated that he would join them later.

They got into the boat that they had come in - a shallow fishing boat, with a sail and oars – and set off.

¹⁸ A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. ¹⁹ When they had rowed three or three and a half miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were terrified.

Rough waters would be common on Lake Galilee it was below sea level and surrounded by hills. notorious for squalls and sudden storms. But this was not a storm, (not like the other earlier stormy event on the lake that we know about), No this was a strong headwind. Too difficult to use the sail, so the crew would resort to rowing. But that would be difficult .

So they left from the far East side of the lake, somewhere near Bethsaida.

Mark's account suggests that Jesus appeared in the early hours of the morning, sometime between 3 and 6, if so then they would have been rowing for a considerable time (since "when evening came"), and had only covered 3 or so miles. Notice the specific distance – an eye-witness's detail. What is its significance? Readers would not be expected to know the size of the Lake and that it was probably about half way across, even less if they were hugging the coastline, - the readers would appreciate just how long and arduous a trip it was.

Night fishing and the unpredictable nature of storms on the lake had been bread and butter for many of Jesus' disciples, so they wouldn't be expected to be unduly worried. But being on a boat in adverse conditions must have unnerved some of them, imagine Matthew, used to his land-based job of sitting at his tax-collecting table, perhaps we wasn't too sure of his sea-legs, or lake-legs at this point. And there must have been others in the boat like that, out of their comfort zone.

And now as Mark would have it, they would be at their lowest ebb for the human body. I don't know about you but at 3 or 4 in the morning, you feel that much colder (that's a medical observation) and tired! Ask anyone from the prayer teams when the Street Pastors are out!)

And at this moment, of tiredness and anxiety, Jesus appears walking by them on the water.

This is truly heaven and earth coming together. This is an unambiguous manifestation of the Son of God to Man, something that theologians call a Theophany.

And the response to this appearance? - The disciples are terrified - because they did not recognise him. You don't see anyone out there on the water. they were experiencing something defying their understanding - this was supernatural. In Mark and Matthew, they thought it a ghost. Perhaps a water spirit portending disaster?

They weren't likely to recall in Job 9:8 "[that God]...alone... treads in the waves of the sea."

It was not the weather that upset them, it was this manifestation that which was beyond their comprehension.

*²⁰ But he said to them,
"It is I; don't be afraid."*

Two short statements. But how much within them.

Most translations from the Authorised Version onwards translate the first phrase as "It is I". Sounding grammatically correct, if uncolloquial. The Message puts it: "It's me. It's all right. Don't be afraid."

But if we look at the Greek we find the words are literally "I am".

Later on in John 8:58 in a debate with the Jews, presumably Jewish leaders, Jesus uses the same words to declare his divinity ("before Abraham was born, I am!"). On that occasion it was such an outrageous statement to their ears that they started to pick up stones to throw at Jesus.

These are the words that in Hebrew in the Old Testament how God describes himself. Jesus is saying I AM and all the meaning that is summed up, from the burning bush onwards.

Do you know what the most frequent command in the Bible turns out to be? What instruction, what order, is given, again and again, by God, by angels, by Jesus, by prophets and apostles? Well, according to Tom Wright, the most frequent command in the Bible [is not 'Be good' or 'Don't sin' but rather] 'Don't be afraid.'" Since I read that, I now see the phrase everywhere in the Bible! It's like when you change your car and now all of a sudden the same make and model is all over the road system, when it didn't seem to be before!

I am! Do not be afraid! – Words which comforted and transformed the disciples there and then, and have provided comfort and encouragement for Christians ever since.

²¹ Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

The disciples didn't want Jesus near them, let alone in the boat when they saw him as 'something else'. But now they did! They had realised who he is.

Jesus is hauled on board, panic dissipates and relief spreads among the disciples. But then a second miracle: before they know it, they are safely at the other side and all is well.

No one can do this – the instantaneous transportation to their destination. Once again only John gives us this important detail. Some three more miles travelled in an instant.

Interestingly, John doesn't record their response, leaving us to ponder it. Matthew says they "worshipped him... [as] the Son of God", Mark says "they were completely amazed" "because they hadn't understood about the loaves"

Yet, if they had thought about all that they had seen Jesus do – the feeding of 5000 in particular was fresh in their minds, calming the elements in an earlier storm on the lake – they could have accepted the miracles on the lake. Instead Mark – who is generally a bit more honest about the disciples' weaknesses - says "their hearts were hardened". There was still a long way to go!

I think it safe to say that most of us would say we know this story well. In that case what's missing? Is there something at the back of your mind telling you there is a bit haven't heard. It's not what's missing, but who's missing. Peter is missing!

No mention of Peter getting out of the boat and walking and then sinking. It is key to John's inclusion of this incident. It is all about Jesus. Not about Peter and his impetuosity and ultimate inadequate faith.

John is sticking to his point that "*these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God*".

²² The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. ²³ Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. ²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, 'Rabbi, when did you get here?'

These following verses show that the crowd realising that Jesus has somehow eluded them, cross back later on in the hope of finding him. They are mystified because the first thing they ask him is "*when did you get here?*". And in a few verses they even start asking Jesus to give them a miraculous sign. Oblivious that three miracles have taken place in less than 24 hours!

What can we take home from this? There are many things we can draw from this short incident. But here a few suggestions:

Jesus has power and authority over nature

A sign at first, exclusively for the disciples (and eventually shared with all of John's readers) which tells us that Jesus has power and authority over nature, in such a way that enabled him to defy gravity, among other things.

This is how it was! It happened like John (and Mark and Matthew) tells us!

Now it is interesting that you will find no shortage of 'explanations' for this particular miracle, as to how come Jesus could walk on water. Eminent commentators somehow feel compelled to find quite literally a natural foundation for this incident. A sandbank, rocky shelf, shallows, even freezing water – but experienced boatmen would have known if such existed, and not be terrified of that! There is no reason believe anything other than that this was the Son of God defying gravity and wind and walking on the surface of the water as the disciples witnessed.

Can I briefly tell the story of the boy whose parents never attended church. At age 10, he spent the night with a friend and attended church with their family the next morning. His mother worried the church might have indoctrinated her boy in that short time asked, "So what did they teach you in church today?"

"Praise the Lord!" The boy exclaimed, "We learned how God led the children of Israel through the Red Sea on dry land. He parted the waters and made a way for them to escape from Pharaoh. Isn't that something mother? Praise God!"

The mother was quite taken aback and finally mustered the secular wherewithal to counter what her son had heard in church. "Now, son, scientists have proved that it was the Reed Sea, not the Red Sea," she explained. "The water levels were low at that time of year and a strong wind from the west could have pushed back the little remaining water and dried out a path. It wasn't a miracle, it was perfectly natural."

"Praise the Lord! That's even better," her son replied.

"Even better?" the mother asked, exasperation showing through in her voice.

"Yes, God drowned mean old Pharaoh's army in the Reed Sea which is a miracle because it didn't have hardly any water!"

Don't be afraid - take Jesus aboard

Don't be afraid - this surprising command, is exactly what we need to hear from God. But at the same time, it is a command we can find hard to follow. We live in a world in which we are waiting for things to go horribly wrong, and we live with the constant anxiety of failure. There was news this week of increasing numbers seeking help for depression and suicidal thought. International news alarms us. When we have no idea what is happening, or what might come next, we can be very afraid.

We need to recognise that fear and worry are natural human reactions to stressful situations. The question is, do we try to deal with our fears ourselves, or do we let Jesus deal with it?

Take Jesus aboard - The key to resolving the disciples' distress was not Jesus' presence alone. His presence required a response of faith. That was that they were willing to take him aboard.

As we struggle with the headwinds and storms in our lives, inviting Jesus to come on board means that we know that there is someone there alongside us, someone who will ride out the storm with us, and who cares deeply about us.

It is ironic that what the disciples feared most was what (or rather, He who) brought them help and rescue. It can be so with us. We can find that confronting our fear with Jesus might not remove us from pain, or problems or dangers, but it does give us the ability to bear the storm.

And let us not forget the second miracle, that instantaneous transportation to a safe haven. We have our prayer boats –some are moving slowly, some are becalmed, and yet when God answers, home they will come. I know that many of us are on one of those boats. Waiting for God's timing. Our confidence is in Him to answer. If you haven't put up a boat, think and pray upon it.

And finally,

Be expectant

The disciples didn't expect Jesus to appear, or for him to help. Faith is a mind-set that expects God to act. If we live with this expectation then, as in this case, we can overcome our fears. But it is more general than this.

In this world we must find out where God is acting, where God is working and join him there. So that we can be, as it were, at the coalface of the Kingdom.

And if you want some ideas - read the reports for the Annual Church Meeting. There is much here that shows us where God is acting – be part of it!

Amen.

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