



The Eighth Sunday after Trinity  
10 August 2014

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## How Beautiful are the Feet of the Messengers of the Gospel of Peace

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

**Readings: 1 Kings 19.9-18; Romans 10.5-15; Matthew 14.22-33**

Have there been times in your life when you have wanted to give up, times when all that you are facing just seems too difficult or overwhelming and you do not know how you are going to get through the problem or opposition or struggle? At such times there is surely a hope in all those who pray, that our prayers will be answered in a real and recognisable way: that the person we pray for will find a way through, that the calamity will be averted, that the war will stop, that the person who you love will recover, that the danger will be overcome, that victory will be salvaged at the very moment of defeat. But life as we know is not always like that. Bad things happen to good people. It is incredibly difficult to see those you love in pain or struggling. The immediate desire is to try and find a way of intervening to avert or put right the difficulty, find the solution to the problem and make things better. Of course there are times when we can do this and that is brilliant. We can provide a solution, or resolve an issue or get a medicine for a sickness that transforms everything. Think of how many charity appeals work on that principle.

Music begins. “Rashid has not eaten today neither will he eat tomorrow, all day long he lies waiting for help that does not come. Without the food and medical supplies he needs Rashid will die. By donating £5 you can provide the food that he needs to survive for one week. £15 will provide the medicine he needs. By donating £100 you help provide Rashid and others like him with the future he deserves.” How important such acts of giving and charity are, and we constantly witness in the most extreme deprivation, how acts of generosity do bring life-giving help. But there are also times when we experience complete powerlessness when we simply cannot avert the crisis and £100 does not provide the answer. We want to be in control and to provide answers. Instead we are forced to live with the pain, to live in the place of uncertainty and fear.

Elijah is in this situation in our first reading. He is demanding God’s justice, God’s protection and punishment of his enemies. He has been faithful and zealous for the Lord but his life is threatened. Like Moses going to the mountain, it is as though he expects God’s decisive intervention, the revelation of God’s power on his behalf. The Lord is about to pass by – so what will the Lord do to vindicate him? And there is a wind so strong that it splits the mountains, but the Lord was *not* in the wind, and then there was an earthquake, but the Lord was *not* in the earthquake, and then there was fire and the Lord was *not* in the fire. And then there was the sound of sheer silence... What does silence sound like? The place of no answers, the place of no immediate solution, the place where action ends and we live the unknown and come face to face with our mortality? It is to this place, this silent place, the place of powerlessness that our prayer leads us. And it is in this place, our Gospel for today suggests, that faith in God is born.

In the Gospel, Jesus, after the crowds leave him, goes to that silent place – to the mountain, to pray. Meanwhile, his disciples, who have gone on by boat ahead of him to the other side, are making little headway. They have the wind against them and their boat becomes battered by the waves and they are far from land. Matthew’s account is a parable of fear and trust. These waves and sea are a symbol of all that threatens to overwhelm our lives: it is the chaos of the unknown, the depths we cannot control or ever fully master, beating against our boat. But now Jesus comes walking on the water. It is as though even in the same seas he is above the waves, not drowning, or pulled down by them. And they are terrified of him, seeing this vision like a ghost in the night, another unknown

which they cannot understand or explain. And Jesus speaks to them; “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” He is not silencing the storm but he is present in it, with us in the very place of our fear, calling for courage. What is this courage? It is the courage, even in the moment of powerlessness and the unknown, to trust in the presence of a love and a presence greater than our own. It is not a call to self-preservation and defensiveness but into faith’s daring.

For Matthew and the early Christian fragile community there must have been many times in which they felt that they had embarked upon a journey to the other side without their Saviour, abandoned by the very one who had called them into this seemingly reckless journey. The memory of Jesus, the one who had died and risen, now like a ghost, a nebulous incomprehensible faith, as they faced loss and persecution and fear. And here is Jesus. Jesus who has not abandoned them but, as a member of our congregation, Gemma, wrote in one of her Bible reflections, Jesus is “riding the waves” and calling us to ride them also; calling us not to self-preservation but to trust in God and in goodness and in life and love, and forgiveness and healing and peace, even at the very heart of the storm. That is where true courage is born, not in some misguided sense of our own invulnerability and control, but in that drowning place where, threatened with our own mortality, we still choose to believe in goodness and to love and to trust. Here, in terrifying vulnerability, good news is born. We know who God is, for we know what our deepest humanity longs for. The God whom we doubted but now seems to walk across the storm.

But how similar to our own response is that of Peter: the desire to trust, and yet the fear of trusting? Jesus calls him to come. Peter starts to walk to walk across the fear and chaos but then he notices the waves and all that can swamp and overwhelm him and begins to sink and drown and cries out: “Lord save me.” And Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him – and he speaks to Peter and he speaks to the disciples in the boat and he speaks to all of us. “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” How far have you got on the path of faith before you too began to feel that sinking? But perhaps it is out here on the edge of our lives, on the gunnels of eternity, that we really meet our God. Perhaps it is only here where we see for an instant beyond our own instincts of self-preservation – that we can hear what God really asks of us.

My mother calls out in the night. She is in pain from the osteoarthritis in her back which is taking away her mobility. I want to take the pain away, to provide the answer. What is the medication, the help she needs? Is the pain real or imagined? Deep down, the frustration, the powerlessness... Why am I failing in helping her? And I end up seeming agitated or disbelieving. “What can I do?” I ask.

“I don’t want you to do anything” she says. “I just want you to understand and to be there for a moment.” Presence... A real presence like a hand stretched out. And I listen and we are no longer drowning but together we walk on water. I push her in a wheelchair across the park, stopping to look and wonder and we try to name the trees together. There is a deeper presence but can that presence of God stretch across the world? “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek,” St Paul says in today’s epistle, “the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.” On the television the images from Gaza are shrieking into our consciousness – when will this tragedy and violence end, the endless cycles of justification and blame, while the killing continues? Tonight we witness a small boy, the same age as my nephew, screaming in pain as doctors try to treat him. He does not know that his little sister who was with him is already dead. And there, present in the midst of the storm, a doctor calmly trying to provide help in a ward of chaos, like a hand held out in the storm. In the place of death, giving life. The news turns to the outbreak of the Ebola virus – where we see a nurse tenderly caring for a sick child despite the risk to herself of infection. The news moves on: tens of thousands of Christians from the town of Qaraqosh in Iraq, fleeing after it was taken by fighters from ISIS. Faced with the demand to renounce their faith or die, they have decided to flee their homes and take their chances as Christians, for how can you renounce the very one who you believe can lead you through the storm?

But is God silent? Is Christ as powerless as they are? Or is he there with them calling them not to be afraid even in the face of death, riding the storm? We, like Elijah, long for the divine intervention from above. But perhaps the intervention is already all there, so close that you didn't recognize it: present in mothers or children such as these whose cries are the call of Christ to our world; a faith in God of life beyond all circumstantial reason; witnesses to the Word made flesh – and the longing for the reign of Peace. “How beautiful are the feet of the messengers of a Gospel of peace.”

Can we, like those first disciples, find Christ in the storms of our own lives, riding the waves of chaos which threaten to drown us? Can we hear Christ speaking to us, calling us to a God of a love and a peace far deeper than our fears? Can we become the messengers of that Gospel? And can those whose suffering we witness on our screens reach out to our world and save us?