

Take Heart, Jesus is with you.

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Eucharist for the inauguration of new leaders and the baptism of children in the Dinka language congregation, 30 January 2011 (the sermon was interpreted into Dinka).

Matthew 14.22-33.

I have not done much sea travel. In fact the longest journey I have ever made by sea was between the Fleurieu Peninsula and Kangaroo Island. The trip takes about two hours and I was very seasick both ways. The seas were enormous and the boat rocked violently as it pushed through the waves. I was more than a little afraid. I have actually spent more time under the water scuba diving, which is a very dangerous activity but it is mercifully calm at the bottom of the sea - even if there are dangerous creatures and the ever-present threat of equipment failure, like the bends and loosing your way. Quite frankly the sea, the ocean, is a dangerous and alien place. In the Bible the sea is a symbol for all the uncertainty, chaos and destruction in our lives.

I know that as I stand here today that many of you have experienced much more uncertainty and difficulties than I have or probably ever will. Your experiences in refugee camps in Africa, being immigrants in a strange land, being away from family and friends and is a story about uncertainty and difficulty. Yet this is part of the stories of all peoples in all places. We live in a world full of challenges and hardship. We just need to think about the events that have happened in Norway, a country that thought it was free from the worst types of violence. We can in fact never take peace for granted.

The Christian church and Christians throughout the world also face danger and persecution just because they confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. As you well know this has been the story of your church back in Sudan. But whatever countries we come from we all have our personal stories of uncertainty and fear, of oppression and difficulties, of pain and suffering. Our lives can feel like a dangerous and windswept ocean where we cannot see where we are going and we feel we cannot reach safety.

This is why today's gospel is so important for us and our children. Jesus, after the miracle of feeding the 5 thousand, goes away by himself to pray. The disciples have gone on ahead in boat. All seems OK until a storm begins and the wind comes up. The boat is driven back from the shore and is battered by the waves. And then something even more strange happens. Jesus begins to walk towards them on the water. They think he is a ghost and they cry out in fear. You can imagine their voices screaming and shouting above the roar of the wind and the sea. And then Jesus says those wonderful words. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid". These are more than just comforting words. When Peter, that rash, enthusiastic disciple steps over the side of the boat and starts to walk towards Jesus but then begins to drown Jesus reaches out and saves him. Jesus pulls him from the depths and carries him to the boat.

This is a story about our fears and terrors, our hopes and our faith in God. It is a story that tells us that in the midst of uncertainty and danger, Jesus is with us. It tells us that in the darkness of sin of our sin Jesus is close at hand and that he is a powerful saviour.

The man who wrote the beautiful hymn Amazing Grace, John Newton, was a man of the seas who was a slave trader and a man who had no faith in God or Jesus. He partied hard, drank and fought. He wrote that hymn after his ship was in danger of sinking in a terrible storm. He cried out to God to save him and the ship was saved. He became a committed Christian and then worked tirelessly to stop the slave trade. But his faith was more than just a story of being rescued from drowning. He knew himself to be rescued from the consequences of his violent, sinful life, from the shame and guilt he felt about all he done.

Amazing Grace . . .

But there is a catch in these stories of rescue. We must ask for help. We must cry out and say, "O Lord, save me!" So many times we go through life and do not ask for help. Maybe we do not want to admit that Jesus Christ is actually our Lord. But that is the first word on Peter's lips as he realizes he is drowning, "Lord". That is the word that makes the difference. In the letter to the Romans, Paul writes that "the Word, the Lord, is near you, on your lips and in your heart" and that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. And this is what Christians believe. That as we turn to this power higher than ourselves we will find our way through the uncertainty and chaos, that we will be saved, picked up from the depths and put back in the boat.

Does this mean that we will never again have cause to be afraid? Does it mean that everything will miraculously be OK? Does it mean that our lives will then be easy? No. What it means is that the power of Jesus will strengthen us. It will guide us. It will form us in his very likeness so that we can be people of faith, hope and love in the midst of any danger or uncertainty.

This is what we want for our children. It is what I want for my children. As a mother of two grown children who face their own challenges in life I know it is not the challenges that are the deciding factor in their lives. All human beings face such struggles. The most important thing is that my children can call on the strength and guidance of God. That will be given all they need to find their way through life's storms. Jesus leads us through darkness and chaos into wondrous life and light. This is what Baptism means. It is what we hope and pray for our children. As I baptize, that is my prayer for them.

This message of salvation, of light and life in the midst of fear and uncertainty, of peace in a world of violence, this message that Jesus Christ is Lord, is very precious. It is the message that the Church is charged with telling and protecting. The new council of this congregation and the youth council have an important job. You may think it is all about running the congregation, dealing with finances, programs and administration but the point to all of that is this message about Jesus. That Jesus saves. That Jesus is with us. That no matter what we are going through the Lord will be with us and invites us all to rest in his grace and mercy. Leaders of this congregation I charge you tell this message and take it into your own hearts as you face the challenges ahead. Amen.