

## **'Do not be afraid' (Jn. 6:16-24)**

Revd Dr Simon Gaine, OP

Our reading tells us about a miracle where Jesus walked on water. But in fact, there are two miraculous signs in this Gospel passage. The first is where Jesus comes to the disciples, walking on the sea and arriving at the boat; and the second is the sudden arrival of the boat itself at land. So, in the two signs we have two arrivals, the arrival of Jesus at the boat, and the arrival of the boat at land. The first of these signs speaks to us about *who Jesus is*, his identity, even who he is *for us*; and the second sign tells us about what he *does* for us, the effect he has in the lives of his disciples.

At the centre of the story is the arrival of Jesus, which means that he has been away. Immediately before this episode Jesus had given the sign of a miraculous feeding which led the crowd to want to make him king by force. Jesus of course does not want this, because his kingdom is not of this world. Jesus avoids their plot by going on up the mountain where the feeding took place, while the crowd concoct their plans. And this has the effect not only of leaving the crowd, but also the disciples, in his absence. They've been in his presence, but now he puts them in his absence.

St John gives us a strong sense that Jesus is in control: when he asked Philip the question of how they could get bread for the five thousand, John tells us that Jesus already knew what he was going to do. No less than Jesus, in escaping the crowd's desire to crown him, deliberately left the disciples without him. Jesus makes himself absent deliberately, so that the disciples can experience what his presence means, what his presence means for them. Why the disciples get into the boat we are not exactly told, but

it's not difficult to guess. The next day the crowd will go off looking for Jesus, because they'd lost him, and it's not difficult for us to guess that this is what they disciples were doing too: maybe they too were seeking one they had lost. They were evidently expecting Jesus to have joined them, but he had not yet come to them, as John puts it, and perhaps it was in confusion that they set sail, not knowing where he was, perhaps thinking in their confusion that he had somehow gone ahead.

St John is keen to let us know that this happened at evening, and that it was dark when they were out at sea. It's tempting to think John means us to understand something by this, that the absence of Jesus is like a kind of darkness for us, where we cannot see our way, cannot see the way to God. Later in the Gospel, Jesus will announce, 'I am the light of the world,' but we already know from the first chapter of the Gospel that the Word of God – Jesus – is the light who somehow enlightens everyone in the world. So, where Jesus is absent, we are left in darkness. The futility of the disciples' situation is also emphasised by the fact that, as John implies, they were *trying* to cross the sea to Capernaum, not so much crossing the sea as trying to cross it: their efforts were not getting the required result, just as any effort on their part to find Jesus would not get the required result, unless Jesus, who is in charge, wished to be found. And then there's the sudden storm: the sea rising at a strong wind, a common enough experience for experienced fishermen, but something we are again meant to read more out of. Without Jesus, in his absence, there is confusion in the lives of disciples.

The disciples then don't make it to their destination without the appearance of Jesus: they struggle some way across the sea, but they don't make it where they're going. How

they manage to see Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat, in all this confusion and darkness, I can't tell. Are we to suppose there was enough moonlight to make him out? Or by the absence of such a detail, are we meant to suppose that the presence of Jesus was enough to make him known, since he is the light of the world, and is his own light? All we are told is that the disciples were afraid. We're not told the disciples were afraid of the storm: after all, they were experienced at sailing in sudden storms. What they are afraid of is this figure approaching them in an extraordinary way, as though he might do them harm. This is what fear reacts to: an impending threat or evil. But Jesus changes their reaction from fear to desire: eventually they *wanted* to receive him into the boat. It's not clear whether or not he actually got in, but this leaves the emphasis on the disciples' *desire*. So, from fearing a possible evil they desire him as their good. When we desire, we want something good for us, or at least something we think good for us in some way.

So, what makes the disciples shift from fear to desire, from the perception of an evil to perceiving a good? It's the way the words of Jesus interpret his action of walking on the sea. People have interpreted Jesus *for themselves* as a future king, but here *Jesus interprets himself*, showing himself in his *own* light. 'It is I,' he says, or we might translate it, 'I am.' As with I am the light, John has Jesus allude several times in his Gospel to the name God gave to Moses in the book of Exodus: Tell the people I am sent you. Jesus reveals himself and his Father by the divine name. Just as God made a way on the sea, as we read in one of the Exodus psalms, so Jesus makes his way on the sea. And if actions don't speak quite as loud as words here, and we don't get the hint, Jesus explains the meaning of his actions: It is I, I am; it is I, Jesus, who approach, bearing the name of God: he makes his way on the sea to

show us that he is the Lord. And in that way the disciples no longer fear an evil, but desire the good, for God is what is good for us, our highest Good, and to know him is eternal life. So, the sign shows us who Jesus is, that he is the Lord, and that he is our Lord, our light, our good.

But it is not only Jesus who arrives at the boat; the boat arrives too at its destination, reminding us again of a psalm, where it says of those who sail in ships among storms: 'he brought them to the haven they desired.' So, as soon as they desire to have Jesus in the boat, from being miles away from Capernaum, they are suddenly where they desired to be. While it's intrinsically miraculous to walk on water, it's not intrinsically miraculous to arrive at port: it's just the way they arrive that's supernatural.

Again, I think we're meant to read more out of this, and to conclude that it is the arrival of Jesus *in* our lives that makes us arrive at the fulfilment *of* our lives. We naturally desire eternal life, which consists in the knowledge of God and his Son; we are naturally fitted out for a knowledge of God we can't obtain for ourselves. To the extent that we *naturally* desire this fulfilment it is not miraculous; but to the extent that this divine fulfilment comes to us through the miracle of the Word taking flesh it certainly is something extraordinary and supernatural, above the power of our human nature to acquire. But this fulfilment comes to us as God makes his way to us in Christ, so that we can make our way through him to the Father, and so come to the heavenly haven we desire.

Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.' In becoming flesh, the Word of God became our way to truth and our way to life, eternal life. If there is darkness or a storm in our lives, or our efforts do not seem to be

paying off, we can know that Jesus is our Lord, the Word become flesh, God amongst us, and if we allow God to arrive *in* our lives in Christ, we like the disciples will be able to arrive at the fulfilment *of* our lives, knowing the Father and the Son in their Love for all eternity; and these miraculous signs, whether walking on water or the incarnation itself, will have led us to the divine reality towards which they now point us.