

Sermon

By Ash Leighton Plom

“Beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news”:

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen

Well, good morning! And for those of you who don't know me, my name's Ash, newly started here last month as a trainee vicar.

Have you heard the one about the pessimist, and the dog who could walk on water? There was once this pessimist, who always saw the worst in everything. But they had a friend who wanted to cheer them up.

This friend decided to buy the pessimist a pet. So, the friend goes to the pet shop and says they want a really special pet for their pessimist buddy. And the pet shop owner says, “Well, we do have a dog that can walk on water.”

The friend is pretty amazed, and says, “Hey, wow, that’s like Jesus in the reading we just had from Matthew’s Gospel a moment ago...”

The pet shop owner says, “Yeah, that’s why this joke works in this sermon.”

So the friend says, “I’ll take it,” and buys the dog and takes it round to the pessimist, and gives it to them as a gift.

A week or so later, the friend thinks, ‘I’ll call them up and see how they’re getting on.’

So the friend calls the pessimist, and asks, “How’s it going? Have you noticed anything special about the dog?”

And the pessimist replies, “Yeah... It can’t swim.”

You can look at things in life from more than one angle. You could see a dog that walks on water as amazing, or you could see it as a disappointing swimmer. In my nature – and I suspect you'll get to know this about me – I am sometimes a bit the pessimist.

And I think, if I can be a bit vulnerable with you a second, I suspect the last five or so months have made me worse, in terms of the anxiety of this year's events and its ramifications on my character and how I function.

But it's alright. I'm human. I'm growing and learning as I heal from what this year has thrown our way.

Our reading from Matthew this morning picks up where it left off last week, with Jesus trying to process the ramifications of a shock, himself: he is still seeking some alone time after his first attempt on receiving the horrific news of the death of his friend and relative, John the Baptist (earlier in Matthew, 14.1-12), when he was then interrupted by the Feeding of the 5,000 (verses 14-21).

Last week, Alison beautifully majored on Jesus' compassion: how he pivots to heal and teach and feed the crowd despite desperately wanting some alone time for himself! But this week, we see he makes sure he gets his quiet time, too: he directs the disciples to go ahead of him, while he dismisses the crowd, and then finally he gets to a quiet place to pray (at the start of our reading, verses 22-3, today).

I wonder, how often do you get quiet time to pray? Alison rightly encouraged us last week to encounter God in the Eucharist and the prayers, and to carry that encounter with God out into the world. That's such an important invite that I want to reiterate it, like a sermon series, today.

And if you're not already seeking regular quiet times with God throughout your week, can I encourage you to start? Maybe you never have, maybe you've fallen out of the habit. Well, Jesus himself - God in the flesh - sought quiet time with his Father, and so should we. Perhaps you can build this into your daily rhythm - read some Scripture over coffee in the morning or a cup of tea in the afternoon, and you could tune in to our midweek services online or in church if you don't already. Let me know if I can help, too, I'm here for you.
So... open yourself up today and in this week to seek quiet time with God.

After Jesus' quiet time in our reading, he walks out on the water to meet the disciples in the boat - another famous passage - and that's when Peter has a go at walking on water, too. The Christian life is often likened to this archetypal experience of Peter, walking on water: we step out in faith in response to Christ's call, but flounder about suddenly when we doubt or lack faith as Peter did, and so we grasp for Jesus' outstretched hand as he reaches and saves us and hauls us back in. I wonder whether you have felt like you're sinking recently? You are not alone - it has been a common reaction to the stresses of the last several months. But quiet time with God can help. Jesus had gone through all that stress, then persisted in seeking his quiet time. He role-modelled it to you for a reason! And then he walked on water, so... it's pretty good.

That's not quite where I want to end today, though.

I want to weave in what St Paul said in Romans, too. Because in it, he powerfully reminds us that Christian hope and Christian joy comes, a bit paradoxically, from admitting our weaknesses and what we've failed to do. Basically, from accepting we're not as good as Jesus.

So if you're not seeking regular quiet time with God, it's a comfort to know that this isn't some pressure you must feel, a requirement - like wearing a mask!

Instead, it's built on a foundation of freely admitting that Jesus makes up for our shortfall, that when we try to walk on water and fail, it's not a problem, because he's there, standing firm, and offering his hand.

And so, encouragingly, the Christian life is not trying hard to squeeze a little extra quiet time into your week, or trying hard to meet with God at church, because the new curate Ash basically berated you into it saying Jesus does it and so should you... no, the Gospel is in confessing we're not very good swimmers, and we need the Lord's help to save us.

And suddenly, I think, when we know we're meeting with a generous, gracious, kind, gentle, loving God when we get quiet time with him, it makes setting aside the time much more appealing than if we're trying to do it just because I told you to! And perhaps with the humility of knowing we need the Lord's help to keep us afloat, we don't need to criticise the dog, like the pessimist, doing everyone and everything down because of our own negativity.

And so, to end by paraphrasing Paul: "How can others grab the hand of one they do not believe in? And how can they believe in one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone telling them?"

Everything you've heard today would be helpful to someone else in your life who is not tuning in with you online or sat here in church - the transformative value of seeking quiet time over Scripture and prayer with the Spirit, and the reassurance that when you're floundering and feel you're not good enough, Jesus' hand is extending graciously to you to save you.

So... who can you share your hope and joy with this week? You could ask God to bring someone to mind in your quiet time in the service or the week ahead. And then you could invite them to tune in

or come along with you next week. Because 'beautiful are the feet of the one bearing good news.'
They can even walk on water.