Christ Walking on the Waves
Matthew 14:22-33

The start of another year gives us the opportunity to look forwards. So, as we get back into Matthew's gospel, we're going to look at some of the challenges, and one temptation in particular, that you might face in the year to come – so when they come, you can face them with faith.

Reading: Matthew 14:22-33

Prayer and the Temptation of Power
Look at v22, 'Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side.' '*Immediately he made'* – what's going on here? Something's happened that provokes Jesus to act with urgency. You see, that word *made* is a strong word. It doesn't mean he suggested to them to get in the boat; or encouraged them, or hinted to them. He made them. He compelled them. Even, he *forced* them into the boat. Why? And why the hurry? Why the *immediately*?

I mean, think about when you 'make' someone do something. Either they don't want to do it, so you've got to make them do it, or they don't understand its importance like you do, so you make them. And if you want it done *now*, you *really* make them!

So why this sudden urgency to get the disciples into a boat and across the sea of Galilee and away from here – when it seems they may not want to do that?

Well, think about what happened just before this. Jesus has just fed 5000-plus people with just five loaves and two fish. And as that picnic feast comes to an end, in his gospel, John tells us something that tells us why: 'When the people saw the sign that he had done [the feeding of thousands], they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew." (John 6:14-15).

And that's what's happening. The crowd has sensed something of who Jesus is, and they want to make him king. No more Caesar; no more Herod; no more Pontius Pilate; no more corrupt priesthood - Jesus, you can be our man – you can be our King. Because with you at our head, with your miraculous powers, we can overthrow the Romans, we can break the chains of our oppressors, we can set up the kingdom of God on earth, we can start the revolution!

And of all men, of all the men who could lay hold of power, of all men who could be king, he could, couldn't he? And yet, he refuses to go there. But the disciples, maybe they see things differently to Jesus, and maybe he sees them beginning to think like the crowd: 'yeh, Jesus, you could do this, *we* could do this! And with you at the head, and this crowd behind us, think what we could achieve! Ride the wave man!' And Jesus cannot get them away quickly enough.

You see, this is not how Jesus will use or claim power, is it. He hasn't come to be some king at the head of some rebel army. He's come to take the lowest place,

not the highest, to take the place of shame not glory, to die for rebels not lead them into battle, and to do so he will let go of power not grasp for it.

And he does so to rescue us from our lust for power – from the temptation of power. You see, imagine if you had crowds fawning over you, saying how great and marvellous you were, and that you were their man, and they'd follow you anywhere – what would that do to you… on the inside? The danger is you'd begin to believe it, or be tempted to believe it. And you only have to look at the lives of countless celebrities, or politicians, to realise that fame and power have soul-destroying capabilities.

Now, of course, you might hear that and think – that kind of power, or popularity holds no temptation for me. I'm just not driven like that. Sure, but what about the temptation to be king or queen of your own life and in your relationships, the temptation to control, and to use what power and influence you do have for yourself? In the coming year, every one of us will face the temptations of selfishness and self-centredness, to use situations, or our abilities, for our own ends, maybe even to promote ourselves, and serve our agendas, over and against others. And if in the coming year you do experience some measure of success maybe even you will be tempted by delusions of grandeur - to begin to think you really are something.

So, sure, there aren't going to be crowds of thousands waiting on your every move in 2018 – but a crowd of just one, you, yourself, is enough temptation, isn't it?

And the Bible tells us that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin. So he knew this temptation to power and to self-advancement very real. The devil has already deployed it when he tested him in the wilderness. So the moment Jesus senses it coming, what does he do? He gets the disciples out of there, he dismisses the crowd and then Matthew tells us, v23, 'He went up on the mountain by himself to pray.' He gets the crowd away from him and himself away from the crowd, and he gets alone with his heavenly Father, and he prays.

What do you think he prayed for? We're not told, are we, but I don't think it's stretching it too far to imagine that he prayed for himself and his disciples – because he knows that the way ahead is not one of glorious revolution but of Golgotha – it's the way of the cross, the path of self-denial not self-advancement. So he prays.

Now, if that's how Jesus fought this temptation to power, how will you do it? How will you resist the temptations of control and self-centredness and those delusions of grandeur? Because you can't do it yourself, can you? I mean, think about it: you can't fight that desire to be king or queen, to be the master, by being the master, by more self-mastery, and thinking 'I can do this', can you? You can't fight your desire for control by more disciplined self-control. You can't fight self-centredness by focusing on yourself. You can't fight pride, with pride – 'I'm better than this'. You see, you need a Power from outside you to conquer you. You need a Master to master you, a king to deal with your desire to be king.

And Jesus goes to his Father, and it's only there, in the presence of your Heavenly Father that you'll find the power you need, because it's only him, the one true king, who can deliver you from yourself.

But this temptation wasn't the only challenge Jesus' disciples faced that day.

Faith and Fear in the Storm

Verse 23-4: 'When evening came [Jesus] was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them.' Now, does anything about that strike you? You see, who told them to get in the boat? Jesus. And who told them to go across to the other side? Jesus. Which tells you that you can be right where Jesus wants you to be; you can go where Jesus wants you to go; you can obey his clear command, and it seem like all hell has broken loose. And you think – 'Jesus, I'm doing what you told me to do, I'm where you told me to be, and you let this happen!??'

And did you notice how long he leaves it until he comes to them? Verse 25, 'And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them.' Do you know when the 4th watch was? It was between 3 and 6am. That means that in all likelihood these men have been battling the storm for 9 hours. And Jesus didn't come to them in the first watch, or the second, or the third. He waited until the fourth. And what he had been doing in the meantime? Praying. And probably praying for them.

So listen, in the year ahead, maybe even now, you can be right where God wants you to be, and as the Bible tells us, Jesus is praying and interceding for you, and you can still feel far from land. And you can still feel buffeted by the winds of difficulties, whether that's in your marriage or family or relationships; and you can still feel the waves of work issues, or health issues beat against you and break over you, and all of this can leave you feeling fearful and afraid for the future – just like these disciples, and yet Jesus is for you, and he's praying for you, and he sees you just as he saw them. Because it's not your circumstances, that tell you whether Jesus loves you or not, it's his character and it's his cross, however bad the storm.

And Christ comes to them in the storm. Verse 25, 'And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.' Walking on top of the very stuff that threatens to sink them.

Now, have you ever tried to do that? I bet that any of us, who have ever been to a swimming pool have given walking-on-water a go! So how did it go? Or think about Peter and his friends in the boat, because they're fishermen, and they've grown up with boats, so how many times had they played this game as boys – let's see who can walk the furthest! But it always ends the same way, doesn't it!

So given that all of us know this is impossible, maybe you're sat there thinking, 'You don't actually think this happened, do you? I mean sure, the people who wrote this might have believed it happened, but don't tell me we've got to?!' Well, do you think these guys in the boat – at least four of whom were experienced

sailors - believed it? Look at their reaction: verse 26, 'But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear.' Why do they think it's a ghost? Because they know that real, living, *heavy* people can't walk on water. So this thing coming towards them can't be a real person, it must be a phantom, a spirit come from the place of the dead, and they're terrified.

But it wasn't a ghost, was it. It was Christ. So if everyone knows that a real flesh and blood man, cannot walk on water, and if he's not some spook, then who is he?

Well, before they can process that – Jesus calls to them, v27, "Take heart; It is I. Do not be afraid."

In one of CS Lewis' books in the Narnia series, the Voyage of the Dawn Treader, two of the Pevensey children, Lucy and Edmond, team up with King Caspian and go on a great sea adventure, in their ship the Dawn Treader. And in one of those adventures they steer the Dawn Treader towards the Dark Island: an island totally shrouded in an all-enveloping dark cloud. And under that cloud is the place where your dreams come true. And to start with, everyone thinks that sounds a great place – yes! My dreams get to come true! Except, they start to remember some of their less pleasant dreams, their nightmares, and suddenly, as they find themselves in the pitch black, with no wind to get them out again, the place where your dreams come true becomes a nightmarish place, and the battle with their thoughts begins. And Lucy is up the mast, in the fighting top, the crow's nest. And like all the others she begins to despair of ever getting out of this terrible place, when a beam of light pieces the darkness and an albatross comes flying on its long wings towards them, and as the albatross circles Lucy, she hears him speaking, 'Courage, Dear heart.' And she knows it's Aslan the Lion, Lewis' picture of Christ.

And as these disciples are in their own nightmarish place, with death just one breaking wave away, Jesus comes to them – speaking – Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid. And he comes to you and me in our nightmares, in those times when life isn't working, when the winds and waves of circumstances are beating, when the thing you dreaded is happening, and says, "Courage, dear heart, It is I."

But why should that give you any hope? Why can Christ coming to you, saying that, bring any fear-destroying power? Why should this be like a shaft of light in the darkness, showing you the way?

Because of who this man walking on the waves is. You see, when Jesus says, 'Take heart; it is I', and Matthew, who was in the boat, translates that into Greek he uses the words, *eigo eimi*. Literally, I am. It's an echo, rolling across the waters, of God's covenant name, YHWH, I Am Who I Am.

And that's who comes to them, that's who comes to you and me, in the storm. I Am. And whilst you might try, you can never fully control the circumstances of your life, somethings will always be out of your control. But not his. And he's

Lord over creation, Lord over whatever storms hit you. You see, in the ancient world, the sea was the place of chaos. And Jesus comes strding over it, walking over the chaos of life. And everything else can change, and everything else may be up in the air, and there may be times in your life when it seems like chaos is reigning, and winning the day. And Jesus comes to you, with it all under his feet, and says, Courage, dear heart – I am who I am – I never change, don't be afraid.

But it's not just difficulties that the coming year can bring – maybe for you there are going to be some triumphs, those times when everything seems to come together and work out better than you could ever have imagined, when life excites you. But victories also need careful handling, don't they.

Christ and an Undivided Heart

Verse 28, 'And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."' You see, Peter knows he can't do this on his own. He knows he needs Jesus to command him and call him to come. And Jesus says, "Come". Verse 29, 'So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.'

Now, this is way more than just the fulfilment of a childhood dream, isn't it? – 'hey mum, I got to walk on water today!' Because Peter's not walking on a flat mill-pond, is he. The wind is still blowing, the waves are still beating. Peter has just stepped out into the storm, he's stepped out into the very thing that threatens his boat and his future and his life, and yet he's walking on it. And in the eyes of many of us, that's success, isn't it? To get out of the boat and walk on the waves of your troubles, to walk on the waves of stuff that threatens your future, or the storms of life and rise above them, and not be consumed by them, or drown under them. That's victory.

But then look what happens. Verse 30, 'But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." *When he saw the wind.* Don't you think that's interesting? Because the wind was blowing hard before Jesus came. And it was blowing hard when Jesus came alongside, and it was blowing hard when Peter asked Jesus to call him; but for a short time, as he swung his legs over the side, and felt the water take his weight and as he let go of the boat and took his first steps, for that short time Peter trusted Jesus more than the wind and the waves. He trusted Jesus more than his circumstances, more than his environment. But then he took his eyes off Jesus and once again he saw the wind, and the impossibility of what he was doing, and he sees it's crazy to think he can ever walk on water or through the storm, 'I mean what was I thinking?' – and he starts to sink.

Verse 31, 'Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"' And that word *doubt* comes from a word that means to be divided in two, to try going two places at the same time, to try looking in two different directions – and that's Peter isn't it? Having trusted Jesus, having taken those steps on the waves, now Peter doesn't know which way to look, or who to trust – who's stronger - Jesus, or the wind? Who's more powerful - Jesus, or this chaos surrounding me? And Peter takes his eyes

off Jesus, and as he does, he sinks. His heart is divided, and the storm is about to claim its first victim. And as he sinks, Jesus reaches out and takes him. So all along Jesus was just an arm's reach away, and immediately he has Peter safe.

You see, you can walk on the waves of the storm and through the trials of life with poise and dignity, and you can know a real sense of victory in these things by looking to Jesus; by knowing that he's greater and more powerful than your circumstances and that he's close at hand. Now, of course, that doesn't mean your circumstances will necessarily change – the wind and the waves didn't stop for Peter, but you can walk through them with hope and certainty all the time you keep your eyes fixed on him. But take your eyes off him, and this problem you're facing seems to grow and your anxiety levels rise, and you begin to feel like you're going to drown – because you've begun to believe that the stuff you face is bigger than Christ. Like Peter, you've begun to look both ways, when all along, it's Jesus and his power and his call that needs to fill your vision.

But maybe it won't be life's difficulties you enjoy victory in, maybe it will just be good old-fashioned success, and you feel like God has opened up this opportunity for you, and you've stepped out and you're walking on the water, and life seems great. But when that happens, where do you keep looking? Because you can sink under good circumstances just as much as under bad. You can sink under ambition and pride and success and promotion and payrises just as much as under trials. Let your success, your good circumstances, fill your vision and they will begin to master you. But let Jesus fill your vision and you can enjoy success without losing your soul.

So what if now, or in the future, you feel like you're going under? Like Peter, at first you trusted God and felt that with him you could do this – you could walk through this trial, or you could handle this success. Maybe it even felt like a faith adventure – you got out of the boat – but now it feels like you could drown. What should you do?

Well, listen to Peter again: 'Lord, save me'. You see, Peter may have wobbled, but he still knows who has the power to save him. And it's not himself. So he calls out to Jesus and Jesus takes him. And so when you feel like you're sinking, whether in trials, or sin, or success, it's Christ who has the power to rescue you. And you don't need to doubt his love for you, because at the cross he threw himself into the storm of God's wrath to save you. And if he was willing to save you from the storm of your sin, and the wrath of God against it, don't you think he will keep you safe in your suffering and your success?

And Matthew tells us, v32, 'And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.' Because it's only Jesus who has the power over storms. He's the only true victor. The only one with power over nature and power over our circumstances. So whatever the coming year holds, look to him. Keep your eyes fixed on him. It's why, as he gets into the boat, the disciples worshipped him – and this coming year, so should we.