

7 August 2011, Pentecost 8

I'M ONLY HUMAN!

Matthew 14:22-33

²²*Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.*

²⁵*Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.*

²⁷*But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."*

²⁸*"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."*

²⁹*"Come," he said.*

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

³¹*Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"*

³²*And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." [TNIV]*

FLAT ON YOUR BACK?

"I'm only human!"

Ever yelled that out when too many things came crowding in, or something seems impossible to accomplish?

"I'm only human. Don't push me so much. I can handle only one thing at a time!"

"I'm only human. Don't expect me to do something too difficult, or something I don't know anything about!"

But then we can learn a lesson from one mother, whose family always had at least one sick child at any time. She always said to whoever fell sick: "Flat on your back? That's a good position for looking up!"

A STORM & A GHOST

In the Gospel for today we hear a story about what it means to be all too

human. But we also hear about transcending that humanness.

It's those coldest, darkest hours of the night -just before dawn. And the disciples are in a small boat -perhaps six metres long.

Now, Lake Galilee is surrounded by high hills, and wind can come rushing down the valleys and whip up the lake with waves up to three metres high. It would not be very pleasant in a little boat on a storm-tossed lake!

If that isn't worry enough for the disciples, then something happens to scare them witless. They see a ghost! At least they think they did. For they see someone walking towards them over the water.

So here are these all too human disciples: terrified of the waves, lest they drown; and terrified of a spook, lest it is an evil spirit come to claim their lives.

It shouldn't be too hard for any of us to identify with these disciples. The possibility of dying any moment is all too real for all of us. And I wouldn't be surprised that, if we took a survey of everyone here, a large proportion would claim to have had some scary, unexplainable experience.

But the ghost is not a ghost. It is actually Jesus. And Jesus soon calmed the wind and waves, and the fear of the disciples.

In fact, the disciples' fear soon turned to amazement. "Truly you are the Son of God," they said.

WALKING ON THE WATER

But we need to note what happened just before they said this. In the midst of the windstorm, with the waves crashing against the boat, Peter sees Jesus and says, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." And Jesus says, "Come!" And Peter begins walking on the water, on the storm-tossed waves, out to Jesus.

I'm staggered by this scene.

I can accept that Jesus can walk on the water. He is the Son of God.

But to have Peter, an ordinary bloke like you or I, walking on the water! How can that be?

But what is happening with Peter is also something we all experience occasionally. It's those rare moments when our whole focus is on Jesus only. It's when we have a "spiritual high", and feel in wonderful communion with God. It's when we look out on our lives, and see God there, and know that all things are good. It's like the person at death's door who suddenly is wonderfully happy and at peace, because he knows Jesus is there.

The waves may still be crashing around us. But Jesus is there.

Ever felt that Jesus is right there with you? We know this is always true: Jesus is always here with us. But ever had a profound sense of how real that is: "Jesus is here with me, right now!?" Ever had such an occasion in

your life? These are very rare occasions, but they do happen. And when they happen it's as amazing as walking on water.

For a few moments Peter knew that Jesus could have him walking on the waves!

THAT SINKING FEELING

But we are very human – bound up in our creatureliness. And we soon notice all our troubles and dangers and fears.

We're like Peter. At the very time he became aware of what a wonderful thing was happening, he began to sink. His attention was distracted from Jesus to the crashing waves. And soon he was under those waves.

We, too, know how so many things can overwhelm us. We have that sinking feeling that we'll soon be under the waves and gone for ever.

Even worse, we can get caught up in thinking that everything is only going to get worse. Whether it's relationships, or business, or costs, or people's behaviour. There are far more pessimists in the world, than optimists.

But what this really means is that we have taken Jesus out of the picture. We no longer see him standing on the waves – standing there for us right in the midst of all our troubles.

Now, I want to drive this truth home. Peter was overcome with fear about the waves. But Jesus was standing right in the middle of all those waves. Jesus didn't come in a bigger ship, but walking on those very waves that Peter feared.

And it's still true. Jesus is there right in the midst of our troubles.

JESUS REACHED OUT HIS HAND

Even so, we are very human. And we do let things overwhelm us. We are like Peter, who, despite having Jesus right there with him, still sank under the waves! Jesus asked Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

We know why he doubted. When you're an ordinary human being, you can't help but notice what threatens your life in some way. It may show a lack of faith in Jesus. It may seem absurd to be worried with Jesus right there, but that's the way humans are.

So Peter feared for his life. And went under the waves.

But Peter had a rescuer. Jesus reached out and caught Peter before he was lost to "Davey Jones's locker".

This is our final hope too.

Our strength and faith may be weak and falter. We know it does. But Jesus grabs hold of us, and pulls us into the boat.

Ultimately, the measure of our faith is not what is important. What is important is that Jesus is there to rescue us.

So we may feel threatened by the waves, and about to go under for one more time. But Jesus is there and rescues us.

In the book The Hammer of God by Bo Giertz, there is a scene where a man lies on his death bed. He is absolutely terrified of dying. As death approaches, he becomes delirious, and starts swearing and speaking evil of God and speaking nastily to his family members. Many of the family are terribly upset by such a display of raw anger, hate and meanness. Even the young pastor is afraid, thinking that the devil has gotten hold of old Hans.

It takes an old Babushka – a wise old Christian woman – to point out to all there that it is not us who get ourselves through to heaven. It is just at such a terribly weak time as the moment of death that our Rescuer takes hold of us and brings us home. So even the stormy waters of death – shown in Hans's delirious vile talk – is no measure of what God is doing, or Hans's standing before God. The Saviour is there, and he reaches out and grabs the dying man, holding him to himself.

And note especially this point. We sometimes think we've got to get hold of God in a moment of crisis. But it wasn't that Jesus waited for Peter grab his hand. Jesus reached out, and grabbed hold of Peter! God has grabbed hold of you. He did this in your Baptism. He does it through the reading and preaching of the Good News. He does this through Holy Communion. Jesus has already reached out and grabbed you!

Amen.