

Mark 6:45-52 – Seeing, Coming, Saving

Reading Mark 6:30-52

This evening I want us to look together at the account of Jesus walking on the water to his disciples that we read in Mark 6:45-52. But I want first to set this incident in its context in Mark's Gospel.

Background to this incident

The twelve disciples had been sent away by Jesus on a mission in which they were working in pairs. Jesus then hears that his cousin, John the Baptist, has been beheaded. When the disciples returned and reported back to Jesus about their mission, he said to them "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (v. 31). The disciples needed rest after the demands of their mission. Jesus needed time away from the crowds to mourn the death of John who had played such an important role in preparing the way for his ministry. So they went off by boat, just the thirteen of them, across the lake to a solitary place. They probably did not rush across the lake, but treating this as part of their escape from the crowds, took their time, the disciples enjoying the company of Jesus and conversation with him. They were looking forward to more of the same when they reached a deserted area on the other side of the lake.

But what did they find when they at last reached the other side? The crowds who had seen Jesus and the disciples sailing off in their boat, guessed from their direction where they were going and had rushed around the lake on foot to meet them on the opposite shore. How would you have reacted if, when seeking rest and a time of quiet, you found yourself surrounded by a demanding crowd? Anger? Frustration? A prompt turning around of the boat and quickly sailing away? Such reactions would be understandable and even reasonable. But how does Jesus react? We read in verse 34, "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." Though he is tired and in need of rest, Jesus begins to minister to the crowds.

Jesus calls us to be his disciples: to learn of him and to imitate him. This is not an easy call and is often demanding.

Jesus ministers to the crowds until the latter part of the day. The disciples want to send the crowds away so that they might find food and rest – or perhaps they wanted the crowds to be sent away so that they, the tired disciples might rest. But Jesus insists on feeding this vast crowd of 5,000 men plus women and children – probably more than 8,000 in all – with bread and fish from the lunch pack of one young lad. It is the disciples who have to scurry around among the crowd ensuring all are fed. It is the disciples who have to clear up the mess afterwards – like clearing up Glastonbury after the music festival. Only after this hectic day of ministry, on a day when Jesus and his disciples had wanted rest, does Jesus send the disciples away across the lake in their boat while he stays to dismiss the crowds. Then Jesus, now alone, goes up the mountainside to commune with his Father in prayer and through that communion to seek rest, refreshment and renewed strength.

And this is where the story we are looking at this evening begins – a remarkable story, recorded by Matthew and John as well as by Mark.

Disciples in trouble

The tired disciples are doing their best to make their way across the lake. At first they may have travelled by sail, taking it easy, perhaps even taking a nap as the boat begins to make its way across the lake. But then a sudden storm springs up – a storm for which Galilee was famous. The wind is now too strong, unpredictable and gusty for them to sail. The sail is quickly pulled down and the disciples take to the oars, perhaps working again in pairs and taking it in turns to pull against the storm – one pair of exhausted disciples handing over to another pair almost equally exhausted even before they begin to row.

The disciples are now in the middle of the lake and they are struggling. They are making no progress against the wind and the waves. Those not rowing may be bailing out the water that the waves are now washing into the boat. It is dark and they are afraid – seriously afraid that they will not make it to shore and will perish far from land. The disciples are in trouble.

1. Jesus sees them in their need

The Lake of Galilee is about 13 miles from top to bottom and is about 8 miles wide. The disciples, we are told, are in the middle of the lake; they must be about four miles from shore. Jesus is on the mountainside in prayer to his Father. The night is dark and stormy – no light from moon and stars, no light from the streetlights of a nearby city. It is impossible to see even a few feet. But Jesus saw the disciples. He saw them in the middle of the lake, struggling and making no progress. He saw them tired and alarmed and losing hope. He saw them in danger.

Distance and darkness did not prevent Jesus from seeing the desperate need of those whom he loved and knowing that they needed help. Jesus saw them in their need.

2. Jesus came to them

Jesus saw them and had compassion on his disciples just as he had had compassion on the crowds. His disciples were also at this moment like sheep without a shepherd – they were lost and in danger. So Jesus came to them where they were.

Think for a moment what this means. The disciples were in the middle of a storm-tossed lake. Jesus was on one side of the lake in the dark and without a boat. It would surely have been easy for Jesus to have commanded the wind to cease and the waves to be still, as he had when he was with his disciples on the same storm-tossed lake – an incident recorded in Mark 4:35-41. Jesus could have commanded that the boat with the disciples be transported immediately to their destination. He could have done all of that without leaving his place of communion with the Father. But he does not do that. He comes to be with his disciples.

The distance and deep darkness had not prevented Jesus from seeing the plight of his disciples and the distance and storm tossed lake are now no barrier to him coming to be with them. He came to be where they were – in the middle of the angry lake. He came walking on the water as if it were a smooth path on dry land. No wonder the disciples were terrified when they saw him and thought that they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus quickly calms their fears calling to them, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid" (v. 50). And with that he climbed into the boat with them.

You might ask, "Why did Jesus seem ready to pass by his disciples?" The short answer is that I don't know. But perhaps it was his intention to go before them and to lead them on to the shore ahead of them.

Jesus came to be with them in their storm-tossed boat. He came to share their plight. He came to them.

3. Jesus came to save them

When Jesus came into the boat with them we read that "the wind died down." As I mentioned, on a former occasion when Jesus was with his disciples in a boat during a storm he rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" It is not recorded that Jesus said anything like that here but his presence stilled the wind and calmed the waves. So they were able to proceed safely to shore.

Jesus came to save those he loved from the danger that threatened their lives.

The disciples' reaction

At the end of this section Mark records concerning the disciples, "They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened" (vv 51-52). What has their amazement about Jesus walking on the water and stilling the storm got to do with the miracle of feeding the 5,000 plus?

What they had not yet fully understood was who Jesus is. Who can feed thousands of people with a young lad's meagre lunch? Who can make the wind, the sea and the waves obey his will? Who can walk on water – stormy water – as if it were dry ground?

These are the attributes of the mighty creator God: the one who creates something out of nothing at his command; the one who fills the sky with stars as if he had scattered them from his hand; the one who sets worlds spinning in space around their stars, like our planets around the sun. He is the one who satisfies the hungry with food.

Who is it who can command the wind, sea and waves? It is the one who created them in the beginning and ordained their limits. It is the one who caused a great wind to part the waters of the Red Sea and commanded that wind to cease so that the waters rolled back on those seeking to destroy God's people. It is the one who enabled the Israelites to cross the Jordan River without getting their feet wet. These are the attributes of the living God, the Lord of creation.

What the disciples had not yet understood was that this man, their teacher and master, was and is the living God come in human flesh. He is God incarnate.

What we see then, in this miracle of Jesus walking on the water, is, in miniature, the great drama of salvation. Let me take you back through the three points we looked at earlier.

1. Jesus sees

Jesus saw *us* in all our sin and need.

The Son of God, who dwelt from all eternity with the Father, looked upon us in all our lostness and confusion. He saw *us* as sheep without a shepherd. He saw us as helpless and in danger of destruction. The vast separation between the glory of heaven and the plight of a fallen world did not prevent the Son of God from seeing us in our need and being moved with compassion towards us.

2. Jesus came to us

Nor did the Son of God so value his close communion with the Father that he refused to leave the Father's side. He did not utter commands from heaven, he came to be with us, to sit alongside us. He came to share our lot as a human being and to live with us in a broken and rebellious world. He came to be with us and to feel our pain and know our terror. He came to be right where we are.

But more than that ...

3. Jesus came to save us

He not only came to where we are and identified himself with us, he took our brokenness and rebellion and pain and judgment upon himself when he died upon the cross. He died our death. And by his resurrection he gives us life; he saves us from destruction – from the wrath to come. He stills all our fears. He defeats all the powers that rage around us and threaten to destroy us. He brings us safe at last to our promised place of rest.

He has come to save us, to rescue us, that we might no longer be sheep without a shepherd. We are those who have been rescued, called and are now being led by the Great Shepherd of the sheep. He has seen us; he has come to us; he has saved us, and he will bring us safely home.

Our call to understand and respond

We need to see and understand who this Jesus is. He is the Lord of Glory come in humility to share our shame and degradation. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the triumphant risen Saviour. He is God who became like us that we might be brought back to God.

But I have not quite finished. We have focussed on Jesus as the one who sees, comes and saves, but this Jesus calls us to be his disciples. As the Father sent him into the world, now he sends us – he calls us to continue his great work:

1. Jesus calls us to see

Jesus calls us to be acutely aware of the needs around us in our world. He calls us to see the world and its peoples as they really are – in all their confusion, rebellion and hopelessness. Jesus will not permit us to turn a blind eye to those in need. He will not allow us to ignore those who are far away from us and out of sight.

2. Jesus calls us to get alongside

Jesus calls us to have compassion on those who are lost and in need. He will not allow us to issue grand edicts from afar. He calls us to come alongside those in need and to share in their pain and suffering. He knows full well the difficult and demanding nature of this call, but Jesus will not allow us to shut ourselves away in our Christian ghettos and shut out the world with its clamouring demands.

3. Jesus saves

We cannot save, but we can show the world something of God's love – Christ's love – and provide help in a multitude of ways. And more than that, we can point people to the one who can save. We can tell them of the peace and rest that they can find in the Lord Jesus Christ. We can pray for them, we can help them and we can lead them to the one who is able to save – who turns despair into hope and joy.

Jesus calls us to know him, to learn of him, to follow him and to serve him. How are we responding to his call?

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