

JESUS' MIRACLE OF WALKING ON WATER

In our Gospel today, we have the account of Jesus walking on water.

He had dismissed the crowds and went to a solitary place in the hills where He could pray to His heavenly Father. As He prayed, the disciples in the boat were having a difficult time coping with a headwind. Sudden, violent storms were common on the Sea of Galilee, but the disciples were well qualified to deal with such a storm. Some of them were fishermen who had previously made their living on that same lake. But this storm was more violent than most, and the weary disciples were not making much progress on their way back to the western shore.

Between 3 and 6 A.M., when they were about halfway (about 5 kilometres from shore), Jesus went out to meet them, walking on the surface of the water. Some Bible commentators have gone to great lengths in an effort to explain how Jesus managed to do this. They suppose that He made the water beneath His feet denser than ordinary water, so that it would support the whole weight of His body. (It is said that it is impossible for a person to sink in the Great Salt Lake or in the Dead Sea because the water is so much heavier than a human body on account of the minerals dissolved in the water, but that would still not support a person standing on the surface.) So this is an arbitrary and highly imaginative explanation of Jesus' walking on the water. Others speak of Jesus as transforming His body into some kind of supernatural mode, something like the glorified body He had after His resurrection from the dead. But there is no basis in Scripture for such explanations. We don't have to understand or explain it. It's enough to say that this was another miracle Jesus performed, another instance where He showed that He was not bound by the natural scientific laws that we can never set aside.

It is no surprise that the disciples did not immediately recognise Jesus. After all, it was dark and stormy, and they were not expecting to see Him there. So their immediate reaction was to be terrified and to imagine they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus immediately reassured them.

Impetuous Peter then asked Jesus to enable him to walk on the water too. When Peter said, "Lord, if it's you ..." he wasn't expressing doubt. He wasn't asking Jesus to prove Himself. He was rather saying, "Since I know it is you, I ask you to enable me to come to you on the water." Jesus told him to come, so Peter got out of the boat and began to walk to Jesus on the water. But when he took his eyes off Jesus and looked at the high waves nearby, he became afraid and began to sink. Then he called on Jesus to save him, and Jesus reached out and caught him, admonishing him for doubting.

It was Jesus' power, not Peter's faith, that had kept Peter from sinking, but his doubts momentarily separated him from Jesus' power. We too often miss out on blessings that our Lord would be happy to give us because we don't quite believe He will really keep all of His promises. We too need to ask our Lord to increase our faith. But then we must not sit idly back and wait for something wonderful to happen to our faith. The Scriptures clearly tell us that the Holy Spirit increases our faith through the power of the gospel of Christ in Word and sacrament, the means of grace. So any sincere prayer for a stronger faith will surely be followed by faithful use of the means our Lord has provided for that purpose.

What would you think of a physically sick person who called upon his doctor to make him well but then refused to follow the doctor's instructions or to take the medicine the doctor prescribed? Our faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and we are completely powerless to bring faith into our hearts. Once we have that gift, however, we have a responsibility to nurture and strengthen it according to the means and the instructions God provides. Anyone who neglects the means of grace and loses his faith as a result has no one to blame but himself. Peter is an example of a man who learned the hard way to rely less on himself and more on the words and promises and power of the Lord.

When Peter and Jesus approached the boat to get into it, the wind died down. Those who were in the boat realised that they had just observed and experienced a great miracle that proved Jesus to be the Son of God, and they worshiped him.

If we read only Matthew's account of this miracle, we may overlook another miracle that Jesus performed in this connection. John 6:21 tells us that *immediately* the boat arrived at its destination on the western shore. This miracle did not rescue the disciples from any present danger, but just imagine how weary the disciples must have been by this time! They had been on the lake for about 12 hours, struggling against a fierce wind after a long and strenuous day. Under those circumstances it would not have been easy for them to row their boat another few kilometres even in very calm water. We cannot say whether that boat sailed through the air or skimmed along the water at a very high rate of speed. It seems better simply to state, as John does, that they were at their destination immediately and to leave it at that.