

**Brancepeth Sermon**  
**13 August 2023**

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*1 Kings 19:9–18*

*Matthew 14:22–33*

*Psalms 85:8–13*

*Open our ears, O Lord,*

*to hear your word and know your voice.*

*Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,*

*that we may serve you today and always.*

*Amen*

We have heard two memorable stories today:

the story of Elijah, fleeing from persecution,

hiding in a cave, and waiting to discover whether God

is still with him, still has anything to say to him;

and the story of the disciples out in a small boat  
on the Sea of Galilee, encountering Jesus walking on the water,  
and of Peter trying and failing to walk on the water himself.

Let me start with that Gospel story.

I must admit that, when I started planning this sermon,  
I could not initially see what to do with this passage.

We are, as a family, heading off on holiday next week  
heading to the Isle of Mull to begin with,  
and so we're going to be taking a ferry.

And, as we cross the sea, even though it will be a short trip,  
I'm planning on staying firmly in the boat.

I am *not* expecting to get out and walk on the water.

And, if I'm completely honest,

I don't really think that signals a lack of faith on my part.

I mean, I do believe in miracles;

I do believe that God can do amazing things,

but I don't honestly believe that God expects me or you  
to walk on water.

And I'm pretty sure I know what would happen if I tried.

So what *are* we to do with this passage?

What can we learn from it if we're not going to try following directly in Peter's footsteps –

or at least, in the first couple of footsteps he took

once he left the boat?

Well, one direction we could take is to

think a bit more about what the sea represents.

Because if you were hearing this story as

a first century Jew in Palestine,

you might hear it a bit differently.

You would be used, perhaps, to singing Psalms in which

God is portrayed as lord over the sea.

Psalm 93, for instance, has the words,

<sup>3</sup> The floods have lifted up, O Lord,

the floods have lifted up their voice;

the floods lift up their roaring.

<sup>4</sup> [But] More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,

more majestic than the waves of the sea,

majestic on high is the Lord!

Or Psalm 29 says that,

<sup>3</sup> The voice of the Lord is over the waters;

the God of glory thunders,

the Lord, over mighty waters.

<sup>4</sup> The voice of the Lord is powerful;

the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.

And behind these words,

we can perhaps glimpse a deeper idea

that seems to have been part of the

imaginative world of Israel and her neighbours:

the idea that the sea represents everything that is

overwhelming, even terrifying.

On land, we can, much of the time, order our lives;

we can mark out our space;

find some stability;

make for ourselves some kind of habitation,

and tend our gardens.

But the sea – the sea is vast and ungovernable.

It can be smooth and glittering one moment,  
and in the next – though I will try not to think about this  
when I am on that ferry –

it can become surging and destructive.

You can't make the sea your *own* in the way  
you seem to be able to do on land;  
you can't mark it out, smooth it flat, and build on it;  
you can't turn it into your habitation, or your garden,  
and expect to get away with it for long.

And so the sea can come to be an image for  
the uncontrollability of things,  
for the way that life can and does overwhelm us,  
the way that things can, without warning,  
spiral out of our control,  
the way that our neat plans can crumble,  
and events can take over,  
making a mockery of the stability we thought was ours.

In that sense, I *do* think that I know what it means to be  
*metaphorically* battered by the waves,  
*metaphorically* far from land,  
*metaphorically* to have the wind against us,  
just as the disciples *literally* found themselves.

If we read the passage in this way,  
it might offer us an encouragement  
when we experience chaos,  
when we are tossed about by the waves  
– an encouragement that we can trust in God.

Because, as those Psalms suggested, the sea is God's;  
God made it.

God knows all its moods.

God – as an Indonesian colleague of mine expressed it recently –  
knows each of the waves by name,  
and can speak to them as friends.

God can walk over the sea as if it were dry land.

Because we know that God is a God of life, of flourishing life,  
beyond whatever chaos and destruction the world can throw at us.

So: the message we can take from this Gospel passage  
might be quite simple:

trust in God!

hold out your hand for God's hand,

and God will reach out for yours.

God will not let you go.

However far under the waves you slip,

you are not, and cannot be, out of God's reach.

That is one message that I hear in this passage.

But I think there's a second message for us to hear as well.

Because in the world that we live in now,

there are thousands upon thousands of people,

millions of people,

who have been having that experience of

their lives spiralling out of any kind of control.

They were living lives that were calm and predictable,  
lives in which they could build a habitation,  
lives in which they could tend their gardens,  
lives in which they could make sense of the world around them.

They now find that events have overwhelmed them  
and washed all of that stability away.

There are thousands upon thousands of people,  
millions of people,  
who, like Elijah, have found themselves fleeing from  
situations and regimes in which they are no longer safe,  
have found themselves and their families under threat,  
have found all security gone, all stability gone,  
all chance of stable habitation gone.

We all know about the war in Ukraine,  
but there is also war in Myanmar, and in Ethiopia,  
and in Sudan, and in Yemen, and in many other places.

There are countries torn apart by ongoing conflict  
like Syria, and Afghanistan.

There are countries like Niger, reeling from a coup.



And then there are whole areas of the globe  
slowly becoming uninhabitable because of the climate crisis  
a problem that over the next few years is going to become  
far, far worse than we can currently imagine.

So there are thousands upon thousands of people,  
millions of people,  
who metaphorically have found themselves at sea,  
battered by the waves, far from the land,  
and with the wind against them,  
in ways that few of us can imagine,  
and that I hope few of us ever have to imagine.

And many of them find themselves *literally* at sea as well,  
taking to the water in desperation,  
hoping to find safety on the other side,  
often in small boats, not much bigger than the one  
the disciples were in on Galilee.

Some of those people – a *tiny* percentage of them –  
are trying to come to the UK.

Really not many of them, overall.

If you count the number of asylum seekers,  
per head of population, for each country,  
and then arrange countries in order of  
how many asylum seekers come to them,  
the UK is 22nd in Europe.

That is, there are 21 European countries where  
more people seek asylum, proportionally, than seek it in the UK.

21 countries, in Europe alone, who  
do more to help people fleeing war and persecution than we do.

And the vast majority of those who do manage to get here  
to make asylum claims

are then recognised as genuine refugees

or people in need of humanitarian protection.

Just over three quarters of those who claim asylum,  
when they *are* finally assessed, are granted that status.

And of the quarter who are *not* initially granted that status,  
many then appeal, just over half are successful.

So in the end – and I’m using the government’s own figures here  
– for every 20 people who claim asylum in the UK  
at least 17 are found, even in our avowedly hostile environment,  
to have a genuine need to come here –  
to be fleeing from real peril.\*

So we know, we know beyond any reasonable doubt,  
that we are faced with people at sea –  
both literally and metaphorically –  
people in small boats trying to reach the UK by sea,  
because their *lives* are at sea,  
because they have been overwhelmed,  
by forces beyond their control –  
because they are, like Elijah, at risk.

And I think our passages today therefore pose a question to us.

We, here, are meant to know God as our protector.

We are meant to trust God

as one who will not turn away from us when we are at sea,

who will not let go of us when we start to sink,

as one will not stop speaking to us when we have to flee –

whatever persecution comes, whatever chaos arises,

whatever waves threaten to overwhelm us.

We gather in this building to thank God for

that presence, that protection, that care.

We celebrate it, we sing about it, we proclaim it.

As people who know such care,

who know such protection,

who know such rescue,

what should *our* reaction be to those

being overwhelmed by worse waves than any we are facing –

metaphorically and literally –

those who, like Elijah, are

being persecuted and driven from their homes?

As those to whom so much mercy has been shown,  
what should our reaction be to those in need of the same mercy?

If we rely upon a God who speaks to us  
in the sound of sheer silence  
after the earthquake, fire and wind;  
if we trust in a God who holds us by the hand  
when the wind is against us, and we begin to sink;  
if we worship a God of welcome, mercy and protection  
who offers that welcome, mercy and protection to all  
– what kind of church, what kind of people,  
what kind of country should we be?

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\* At <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2022/how-many-people-do-we-grant-protection-to> figures are given for 2022 (published 23 Feb 2023). There were 18,699 initial decisions, of which 76% were ‘grants of refugee status, humanitarian protection or alternative forms of leave’. There were 3,815 appeals on initial decisions, and ‘around half (51%) were allowed’. That means around 1,945, which represents (approximately) a further 10% of 18,699. Although the appeals decided in 2022 will presumably not all have been on initial decisions made in the same year, the combination of these figures suggests a final rate for positive decisions on asylum applications of around 86%.