

## 19A SFX 2023

It is around 860BC, the place is the Northern Kingdom of Israel, where the rather weak King Ahab rules the country, and Ahab is ruled by his wife, Queen Jezebel, the Lady Macbeth of the Old Testament. A strange man of an unknown age appears on the scene – Elijah the Tishbite. Called to be a prophet of God, called to speak truth to power speaks out about the corruption and infidelity of Queen Jezebel and her cronies. When the queen is away on one of her shopping trips Elijah challenges her prophets to a public contest on the top of Mount Carmel. Elijah wins hands down. But has to flee.

On the run Elijah was frightened, exhausted, ready to lay down and die. But there on the mountain, not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire but in the still small voice he heard the voice of God and hid his face in his cloak. Elijah came to trust, he comes to listen to something deeper than the wild forces of nature. In a silent whisper Elijah finds calm and carries on.

Sometimes life throws a lot at us that can seem overwhelming. For Elijah it was Jezebel and the prophets of Baal. For Peter and the disciples, it was the wild forces of nature.

While the other Gospels tell of the calming of the storm, only St Matthew tells the story of Peter walking across the water in imitation of his Master. The headstrong fisherman thinks he can walk on water! “Come,” says Jesus. But then Peter’s faith fails him. And he sinks. Peter has enough faith to get out of the boat and start walking towards the Lord, but enough doubt that causes him to sink. That, brothers and sisters is the story of my life, and your life. Enough faith that we set out, but enough doubt that we occasionally sink. And we find the Lord saying to us: “O you of little faith. Why did you doubt.”

It is hard not to love Peter. Simon Son of Jonah: that loyal, rough, impulsive, headstrong fisherman: One moment confessing, the next denying. One moment full of faith, the next full of doubt. One moment a faithful rock, the next appearing like Satan himself before Jesus. One moment walking on water, the next moment sinking.

In one of his poems, the Anglican priest and Malcolm Guite finds Peter to be a very comforting figure, as someone who makes lots of mistakes and has lots of misunderstandings but who recovers from them and discovers that Christ loves him in and through those mistakes. He addresses Peter:

Impulsive master of misunderstanding  
You comfort me with all your big mistakes;  
Jumping the ship before you make the landing,  
Placing the bet before you know the stakes.  
I love the way you step out without knowing,  
The way you sometimes speak before you think,  
The way your broken faith is always growing,  
The way he holds you even when you sink.  
Born to a world that always tried to shame you,  
Your shaky ego vulnerable to shame,  
I love the way that Jesus chose to name you,  
Before you knew how to deserve that name.  
And in the end your Saviour let you prove  
That each denial is undone by love.

The character of Peter comforts me: he leaps in with faith. But then his doubts take hold of him. A lot like us, I suppose. We have the faith. It has brought us here today, a love of the Lord, and a love of the Church that despites its flaws and weaknesses continues to present Jesus to us. We live in a difficult world. Who are your prophets of Baal, the people that agitate you, who is your painted Jezebel, the woman who oppressed Elijah? What are the strong headwinds you face: a stormy relationships, straying children, money worries, work concerns and health issues. Who is without their problems? If you are give thanks to God. But even then, when we feel our foot slipping we are able to cry out: *"Lord' I am drowning."* The Psalmist already has a prayer for it: Psalm 68/69 *"Save me O God, for the waters have risen to my neck. I have sunk into the mud of the deep and there is no foothold. I have entered the waters of the deep and the waves overwhelm me."*

We hear the news, and it seems that the storms of life will never end. As I have been reflecting on this Gospel, I have been thinking of the 40 migrants that perished in the Mediterranean this last week as their boat sunk. And the 27,845 recorded dead or missing in the Mediterranean since 2014. That does not include the English Channel where at least six have died today. May God rest their souls and help all who are fleeing trouble and persecution, and societies that are trying to cope with such a movement of peoples. May we be compassionate and welcoming as much as we can.

The sea is vast and we are so small. The storm so powerful, and we easily sink. Life seems beyond our control, and we are helpless in its grip. There is a Breton Fisherman's prayer that asks quite simply *"Protect me oh Lord for my boat is so small. My boat is so small and your sea is so wide."*

Faith and doubt are not mutually exclusive. We obey and fear, we walk and sink, we believe and doubt. We don't do one or the other we do both at the same time. Our faith buoys us up, our doubts weigh us down.

Frailty made Peter falter, but again and again he turned back to the Lord. "Come" says Jesus. He keeps on saying to us "Come." The Lord never said he would fish us out of all our problems, but he did show us he is there with us in our sufferings.

If we are sinking, if we are drowning, then yes look to the Lord with the eyes of faith, but we can use all the resources we find to help us. Like music, lots of music. But the piece that comes to mind is Louis Armstrong who was baptised a Catholic, although perhaps never knew it. Hear him sing in that deep resonant voice of his:

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,  
Nobody knows but Jesus  
Sometimes I'm up  
Sometimes I'm down  
Sometimes I'm almost to the ground  
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen  
Glory, Hallelujah

Oh, every day to you I pray  
For you to drive my sins away  
Oh, nobody knows the trouble I've seen  
Nobody knows but Jesus.