



13 August 2023 - Archbishop Stephen Cottrell | A moment of Reflection.

Every week the Diocese of York offers a prayer video for churches to use either online or in their services. The Archbishop of York leads in a moment of Reflection for the Tenth Sunday after Trinity

The text of the reflection follows in full

Matthew 14. 22- 33

I have given nearly every priest I've ever ordained a photocopy of this little sketch by Rembrandt, depicting the central scene from today's gospel reading where, in the eye of the storm, Jesus walks across the water. He calls to Peter, and seeing him, Peter climbs out of the boat and walks across the water towards him.



Peter, as always in the gospels, is demonstrating his faith, but also his vanity and bravado.

He promises to never let Jesus down, but he is often the first to fall away.

What happens in the story sums him up perfectly. He is full of faith. He climbs out of the boat when Jesus calls him. He braves the waters. He walks towards Jesus. But acting in his own strength, his fear overwhelms him, and he quickly begins to sink.

This sketch depicts the precise moment in the story when, sinking beneath the waves, Peter cries out to Jesus, 'Lord, save me'.

His faith returns, but no longer faith and strength in himself, but desperate need. He is drowning. The dark waters of death are about to engulf him.

And in this moment of terrible need, Jesus, the figure on the left of the picture as you look at it, reaches out to hold him, and to save him.

So you might say to yourself, nothing surprising here. It's not a particularly wonderful sketch. It might be by Rembrandt, but it is just a sketch, and it's not really telling us anything we don't already know. Peter is sinking, and Jesus is saving him.

I wonder whether even Rembrandt liked the sketch that much, since I don't think he ever turned it into a painting.

So why am I showing it to you? And why have I shown it to nearly every priest I've ordained?

Well, it's what's going on behind Peter. And this isn't to be found anywhere in the Bible story itself. But someone else is getting out of the boat.

Someone else is about to walk towards Jesus.

This is how I see it.

When Peter acts in his own strength, when he is full of himself, when he climbs out of the boat and attempts to walk across the water, not only does no one follow him, nobody wants to follow him. Indeed, he is absolutely not worth following. Stay in the boat!

But, paradoxically, when he sinks, and when he cries out to Jesus in his need and vulnerability, and when he reaches out to him, like blind Bartimaeus asking Jesus for mercy, or the so-called penitent thief, asking that Jesus remembers him in God's kingdom, Peter is worth following.

When people see Jesus reaching out to Peter and responding so decisively and with such love to Peter's need, then people bring their needs to God.

And I show this picture to new clergy, because I want them to understand, and I need to constantly remind myself, that my ministry and their ministry is most compelling and most attractive when we know and show our need of God. It is in our brokenness and vulnerability, and the demonstration of our reliance upon God, that we best demonstrate the truth of beauty of the gospel. As people see Jesus reaching out to us, and our need of Jesus, then they see what gospel really is - not an interesting set of propositions about the nature of the universe or the meaning of life, but salvation. When we are sinking, drowning, when the dark waters of death engulf us, God is there to save us. He has sent his son Jesus Christ to be our Redeemer.

And what is true for archbishops, bishops and clergy must also be true for the whole priestly people of God; that the truth and beauty of the gospel is best demonstrated by those who know their need of God, demonstrating that need by their own dependence on God, their humility and their faithful pointing towards Jesus.

When we live like this, showing we need of God, then we are worth following. People climb out of the boat. They leave behind the apparent, but ultimately insubstantial security of what they know cannot in the end save them, and turn to Jesus, and cry out to him in their need: Lord, save me.

4 min read

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