

WEEK 3: MONDAY

Forty years ago I sat in my college room with a friend and we read this passage together. He had come to a living faith in Jesus just a week before. He was still wide-eyed with delight at the sense of Jesus' personal presence within him, and at the changes he could feel happening in his heart and head. But he was also anxious. Is this just a fad? Can I keep it up? Will this just be one of those things that is very exciting for a few weeks, and then will fade, leaving me a bit sad and cynical?

This passage might have been written for someone in that frame of mind. Peter is one of the few characters in the gospels, other than Jesus himself, whom we really get to know. This story is typical of the man we see all through — loyal, impetuous, wanting to do the right thing, then getting it embarrassingly wrong and having to be rescued once more. Many of us can identify with him only too easily.

But before we even get to Peter's bit, notice what has happened. Jesus has just fed five thousand people with what started out as next to nothing. As we know from the other gospels, the crowds were, not unnaturally, very excited at this. Jesus as always was anxious that things shouldn't get out of hand (John tells us that the crowd wanted to seize him and hail him as king then and there, which would have been disastrous). So he quickly sent the disciples away and disappeared up the mountain.

Then it happened. Some time after midnight, as they were still tugging at the oars and getting nowhere, he came to them. Walking on the water.

This is such a strange story that many have sneered at it, but Matthew and the other writers knew perfectly well how strange it was and told it anyway. We have been learning, bit by bit, to see that Jesus seems to have possessed a kind of sovereignty over creation itself. Though our minds boggle at the thought of what that might mean, the story fits this pattern. The disciples, not unnaturally, are scared out of their minds: it must be a ghost! But no; Jesus tells them it's all right. They are not to be afraid. ('Don't be afraid,' by the way, is the most frequently repeated command in the whole Bible — something we all need to remind ourselves in our worrying and frantic world.)

Then it's Peter's turn. Triumph, disaster and rescue. Peter the fisherman knows perfectly well you can't walk on water. But, as we saw in chapter 10, Jesus gave the Twelve power to do the things he'd been doing . . . so maybe with this as well? And, amazingly, it happens. Peter walks towards Jesus. That is the walk of faith which we all take when we hear Jesus' voice and begin to follow him. We know perfectly well the world isn't like this; that money, sex and power are what matters; that we can't possibly give up our bad habits or keep up a life of prayer and holiness . . . but perhaps we just might, if Jesus himself called us to do it? Yes, he says, I am calling you; and off we set.

But then it all goes wrong. The wind had been there all along, but now Peter noticed it as if for the first time: what am I doing? I must be mad! I can't possibly . . . and he starts to sink. That's how it is for us, too. But the crucial moment is the next one. 'Lord, rescue me!' The simplest of prayers, and one which Jesus loves to answer. That's what he's come for, he said on another

occasion, to look for people in need and rescue them. He may then smilingly remind us that we shouldn't have doubted. That's the lesson we need to learn, and it will take time. But he comes into the boat with us; the wind stops; and the result, of course, is worship. I doubt if the disciples quite knew what they meant by 'Son of God' at this point. But there wasn't much else they could say.

I lost touch with my friend after we left college. But just the other day I met someone who attends the same church. He is still going on, trusting Jesus, walking with him, helping others in their own faith. No doubt there have been times when, like Peter, like you and me, he's been tempted to doubt, and has started to sink. But Jesus loves rescuing people. That's what he's come to do.

TODAY

Lord, give us the faith we need to attempt the impossible for you; and rescue us when our faith suddenly gives out.