

“Walking Lightly”

(Matthew 14.22-34)

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Introduction

In JRR Tolkien’s classic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, the Ring Fellowship (the heroes), are trying to cross the mountain pass of *Caradhras*, when they are attacked by a fierce malevolent storm. It leaves them trapped by metres of heavy snow on a precarious ledge... blocked in all directions and in imminent danger of dying from the cold. But with them is Legolas the elf... Being an elf, Legolas is so in-tune with nature, that he leaves a very light footprint on the earth. Now the mighty warrior-men in the company have strong arms and powerful legs to challenge the snow... but their tread is so very heavy. Whereas Legolas, who walks lightly, very softly... he can literally walk on top of the snow mounds... as if they weren’t even there. And so it’s the elf, who finds the company’s way to safety.... because he walks so very lightly.

Walking on Water

As a young man I’d get tangled up with the miracle stories – did they *really* happen... how *could* they happen? But mercifully a long time ago now... I decided to receive them as sacred stories, and to do as the church did for many centuries... turn them over *imaginatively* in my head and heart, expecting that God was speaking to me directly through them.

And so I *imagine* Christ walking on the water that night... After the ‘big’ day of teaching – not to mention feeding the 5,000 – he’s spent hours on his own in the hills. It’s Jesus’ regular way of prayer – alone with God in the silence... what we’d call meditation. Wrapped in the womb of that intimacy with God, he makes his way across the lake to re-join the disciples. It’s no big deal for Jesus – he just wants to get to the other side. And the different thing about Jesus is that *he walks lightly*. I walk *heavily* through life, as befits a man who carries baggage... But Jesus walks lightly... blissfully unaware of the wind and the waves... because his eyes see only ‘gift and blessing’... and he knows himself held in the embrace of God’s unstinting love. (He just needs to get to the other side!)

Meanwhile, there are the poor disciples... in the boat... making heavy weather of it. Tired... frustrated (because they're not getting anywhere)... on edge, because it's a dark night, there's a strong wind and the waves are building. They're predisposed to fear – that's just how life is for them. So when they see an apparition, walking on the water, they're terrified! Jesus tells them it's OK... it's him... and they don't need to be afraid. Which probably doesn't comfort them much – it just gives them something else to be afraid of... But impetuous Peter – and you've got to admire him – decides he's going to join his Lord... out there on the water.

He jumps out of the boat... and starts walking to Jesus. The story is very precise at this point – Peter *is* walking on the water! But then his fear reasserts itself – he sees the waves and feels the wind and that old world in which disaster always threatens, takes over again... and he starts to sink. The fear makes him heavy again.

Christ Jesus scoops him up and returns him to the boat... and then says, "*Why did you hesitate? What happened to your faith?*"

In the Boat

When I place *myself* in the story, I'm there in the boat with the disciples – making heavy weather of it... in fact, making heavy weather of *everything*! And in that boat there's way too much fear... always afraid that something's going to go wrong, that disaster will come at any time. It's heavy going!

How attractive Christ looks... out there... walking so lightly through the storm. I wish that was me!

And it seems a *simple* story to me... If I want *that* life... if I want to be able to flow lightly like he does... then I'm going to have leave *this* boat and walk to him. I cling to the boat of my *old life* because it promises safety... protection from all that threatens me. But in reality the fear is always circling me like a shark – all around my boat are the waves and wind of everything that *could* go wrong. This boat is more like a prison than a sanctuary... and it's going nowhere. Nothing's going to change unless I let go of this boat and walk to him, that *lightly-walking Christ*.

Christ's Voice

I hear this story's invitation in the words Christ Jesus says to Peter...

"Come" he says... I feel powerful attraction to his light freedom. And I see his beckoning hand, hear his voice... *'Come on then! What are you waiting for?'*

And... *'You'll be alright... You won't drown. I've got you.'* I know the text *doesn't* say that, but in my imagination these words are clearly there. I like the honesty of the story – it's not as if the sea goes carpet-smooth on Peter's entry – it's dark, wild, windy, unpredictable... and the water's deep ... because that's how life is often. But the story ends with Peter safe in Christ's hands... *'You'll be alright... You won't drown. I've got you.'* If I'm going to leave the pseudo-protection of the boat and try walking on the water... I am going to have to trust that God's *got me* whatever comes.

So, in my life here and now, it's verse 31 that grabs me... *"Why did you hesitate? What happened to your faith?"* I guess we could read these words as 'judgement'... *'You idiot, why did you look down? Why don't you believe more? You're hopeless!'* But I don't hear that at all in Christ's voice. Sure, like Peter, I've failed so many times.... chickened out sometimes... or just lost my footing because I didn't know what I was doing... but I don't hear exasperation in Christ. No, it's more like the voice of the coach, sending me back out to try again...

'This time, don't hesitate and whatever you do, don't look back. There's nothing back there for you – you know that!'

'Whatever you do, don't let the fear re-assert itself. You're done with that old life now.'

'Keep your eyes on me... listen carefully to my voice (not the wind)... keep walking... lightly now.'

That's what I'm trying to do... each and every day now. I'm trying to learn how to walk lightly.

Conclusion

What would it be like to walk lightly through life? I find the freedom of Christ so desperately attractive. But I'll never know *that* life, unless and until, I step out from the illusory safety of this boat... this old life that I keep clinging to.

I think it's as simple as that... or have I missed something here?