

Having a story to tell

Naturally plenty of people are asking whether I had a good sabbatical: indeed I did – and thank you to those who took on extra responsibilities to enable it to happen. The three months may be over, but I feel it's provided me with a resource (experiences, insights and plenty of photographs) which I'll be drawing on in the months to come and which I will enjoy sharing with others. I have **stories to tell**: at Repps I've seen beetles kissing; zombie ladybirds at Thorpe Market and Stokesby; and in various churchyards, species I've not seen before; but all that will have to wait.

Matthew has a story to tell this morning. Let me remind you that I don't take the view that the author of Matthew's Gospel is Matthew of the Twelve disciples. So I think, like many of his stories, it's a story he's learnt from Mark; and he repeats and rewords it for the benefit of those for whom he is writing his Gospel. The story – of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee – has much in common with the earlier story of Jesus calming the storm. On each occasion the disciples are in the boat, facing adverse weather conditions crossing the Lake, but Jesus is not available to them (in one case he's not there, in the other, he's asleep). The disciples are afraid (because of the risk of capsizing, or because they think they are seeing Jesus' ghost). But Jesus reassures them (with a hint of a rebuke for their lack of faith) and the wind suddenly drops. Each story has something to say about who Jesus is: surely only God has such authority over the chaotic powers of wind and wave? But the stories also say something about Jesus' availability to his followers, even when that's not obvious; and the assurance of his presence in the face of adversity. The early gospel readers might readily identify with the disciples in the boat with the wind against them, or even in fear of their lives: the stories would encourage them – and us – that we have nothing to fear: Jesus is with us, in Spirit, if not in the flesh.

But Matthew has something to add to Mark's account, for he knows of a story-within-the-story: that of Peter walking on the water. If Matthew wasn't there himself, he must know it because someone has told him this story; maybe it's already circulating within his Christian community; but he thinks it's worth writing down for the benefit of his readers.

In some ways it reinforces the message of Mark's story, but perhaps for an individual believer (Peter, rather than the Twelve) who is trying to make progress against the wind and the waves. Fear overcomes him; Jesus offers both a rebuke and a saving hand.

In other ways, the original story is developed. Peter is offered the chance to do what Jesus did – and, for a few steps, he succeeds. The power and authority of Jesus is now not just available to, but present in his followers (*You will do greater things than these*, says Jesus in the 4th Gospel). It's like a shift from infant to toddler: in the surrounding story, the parental presence is enough to calm the child; but, as Peter takes his first steps, the parent keeps at a distance: encouraging him to stand on his own feet, yet close enough to catch him when he falls. Maybe Matthew's Christian community is a bit further down the road: realising, perhaps, that Jesus' return may not be imminent and that, in the meantime, much is down to them: with Jesus' support, they need to stand on their own two feet and represent Jesus to the world. Maybe their ongoing struggles are causing the faith of some to weaken: Peter's experience both warns and encourages: hang on in there and you won't sink. It seems to me that Matthew knows the power of stories to kindle, shape and strengthen faith.

Amongst my sabbatical mail was an envelope of materials introducing the first stage of our Diocesan Strategy, which is all about encouraging us to share our stories about our faith and what we see God doing around us. I gather some of you have already heard of this at Reedham from Andrew Tapsell; others will have picked it up from diocesan communications. At Beighton this morning we're going to try out the materials in the pack. The point is that we all have stories of faith to tell; but most of us need to become more confident in telling them. For there are plenty of people out there who have little idea of what Christian faith means to us, or what it could mean to them. But, to quote St. Paul, *how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?* Matthew only knew the story of Peter because someone told him. And in our culture, personal stories are likely to carry more weight than official pronouncements: people don't trust product descriptions: they want personal reviews. So let's give them some: let's share our stories.

And if that feels daunting, start in a safer environment. See what stories others are telling (exploringstreams.org). Look to Jesus for encouragement and dare to take those few first steps. We're not being asked to walk on water; and we're not going to drown.