

“A faith that does not wash away”, a sermon based on Matthew 14:22-33, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 9 August 2020.

What might so undermine your faith that it washes away? Might it be a series of personal tragedies? Betrayal by someone you relied on? Abuse by a person you trusted? Might it be that the church’s discrimination against LGBTQI people finally becomes too much? Might it be that you have given up hope for God’s vision for the world including nuclear disarmament 75 years after Nagasaki and Hiroshima, or for peace on the Korean peninsula 70 years after the war began? Might it be nothing that you can name or put your finger on, but one day you find faith and hope have just evaporated?

When I was a student for the ministry leading worship in the little wooden church in beautiful Whitianga, we were part way through the service and a person stood up and said, audibly, I just don’t believe any more, and she walked out. When I went to visit her later she said ... I realised that I was just pretending and I didn’t want to pretend any longer. Something had woken her up and made her connect her outer life with her inner life. Better that than pretending, do you think? And yet, in this week of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I keep thinking of the Reverend Ian Dixon, former Assistant Minister here, who was a chaplain in J-force at the end of World War Two and went to the cities not long after the bomb was dropped. He said that he was so affected by the inhumanity of it all that he lost his faith for a year and had to borrow it from others. More often it is drift, isn’t it? A person who was instrumental in me coming to faith got busy as a lawyer, long hours, grabbing weekends away when he could, and well, faith just couldn’t find room. It’s hard to see that in friends who were influential in your own faith development.

Faith is fluid and flows, and it flows along with hope and prayer and learning and conversing and worshipping. And, it can flow away.

What might we say to help people when we see this beginning to happen?

It doesn't help to say, it doesn't really matter. Because it does. What we believe, what we trust, what we hope for, makes all the difference in the world. If we put our trust in the God revealed in Jesus Christ, we hope for the world God is bringing and the peace God intends. We develop a wholistic view of life, and gain a sense of our own place and true value. We are led to treat creation with the respect it needs and to live within its bounds. We learn how to value the rights of others especially those most vulnerable and to persevere towards the world God is bringing. The American commentator David Brooks has written of how coming to faith upended what he lived for and made him realise the significance of relationships. The book he wrote before becoming a follower feels different to the one he wrote afterwards. Very different.

And it doesn't work to pretend someone has faith when they don't. I have heard people say, everyone is a Christian aren't they? A Christian is a person who seeks to follow Jesus and in New Zealand a small percentage want to live that way. Christians are not better or worse than anyone else, but they are different.

And it doesn't work to try to answer every intellectual question people might have. A lively faith generates more questions than we can ever answer, and those questions are for pursuing so we can go deeper in our understanding and wider in our connecting. I have heard people say – I can no longer believe in the resurrection. So which resurrection don't you believe in? And when they tell me, I often don't believe in that resurrection either. Or I don't believe in a god who controls everything that happens. Well, that is good, because that god would not be a Christian god. Or I don't believe in a heaven up there. Well that is good because you won't find that in the Bible. What people doubt are often popular understandings rather than the Christian faith itself. Christian faith often dismantles popular belief. And questions about that faith do not reflect less faith, but rather that our faith is so alive that it keeps generating questions.

Faith is trust, leaning into, moving towards, continually being reoriented. The opposite of faith is not doubt but cynicism and suspicion and fear and despair and resignation and fatalism. And the biggest threat to faith is not doubt but complacency and sometimes boredom.

There is a New Zealand hymn from Colin Gibson: "When the clouds are low and the wind is strong, when tomorrow's storm draws near, be the spirit bird hovering overhead who will take away our fear. Lord you were our beginning, the faith that gave us birth. We look to you, our ending, our hope for heaven and earth."

The gospel today is about faith amid tempest, trust amid the storm. Barbara Brown Taylor in speaking of this passage says – "If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat. True enough. And here and there, now and again, the church maybe needs visionary and courageous folks who step out in faith to do some new and bold thing. But maybe there are far more times when life in the "boat" that is the church involves no more than faithfully pulling on your oar against the winds that howl, believing that Jesus is near, and so pressing on. You press on in faith not because you've tested Jesus and found that he lived up to all the hype and not because Jesus has enabled you yourself to do something quite grand and eye-catching. No, you press on because you believe Jesus when, through the Spirit, you hear him say, "Chin up! It is I! Don't be afraid!" So keep pulling on that oar!"

Faith is sometimes awakened amid circumstances that are wild and threatening. As in the story, Jesus doesn't turn up when we demand him to turn up or in a form we will automatically recognise. The centre of this story is not the struggles of the disciples. The centre of the story is that Jesus is always moving towards us. As Debie Thomas says, Jesus moving towards us is "constant, focused, relentless, and uni-directional. From the very beginning of the story, Jesus moves towards his disciples. He moves towards them when they're struggling at sea. He moves towards them when they decide he's a menacing ghost. He moves towards them when they're terrified by his approach. He moves towards them when they're

reckless enough to set him a dare. He moves towards them when they begin to drown. He moves towards them when they ask for help. He moves towards them when they're shivering and sorry for their rashness. He moves towards them when they realize — for a beautiful, flickering instant — who he is and what he is. He moves towards them when they worship him. In other words, Jesus never stops moving towards the ones he loves. And he says "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid."

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