

Sermon Sunday 8 August 2020

Walking on Water III Roger Wagner

The vast majority of this sermon has been written by Mark. He had expected to deliver it himself, thinking that between writing this sermon on Tuesday and delivering it today, he and Gabrielle would have crossed the North Sea twice, travelling from Harwich to the Hook of Holland on Wednesday night and coming back on Saturday. They are helping their son Rory move to Holland. But even the best laid plans have hiccups and they had to leave later in the week and so are still in Holland. Mark says that stories about travelling across water are especially resonant with him at the moment!

This Sunday, we invite you to look and reflect perhaps in a different way from usual on the story of Peter as he walks on water, and then falters, to be rescued by Jesus. To reflect first on a painting and then on a poem. Remarkably, both are by the British artist Roger Wagner, who is as perceptive and adept with his brush as he is with his pen and *vice versa*. What do you see?

What are your eyes drawn to? The colours are soft, yet intense, blue, pink and white. The cranes in the centre are finely drawn and the dominant mass in the upper part of the painting is a faithful depiction of London's Battersea Power Station, The whole area, including the power station itself, has been turned into a huge new residential area. Where once there were huge turbines and steam billowing from the famous chimneys now there are penthouse flats. What a transformation.

And what is going on in the foreground of the picture?

The blue light in the air continues over the water. Is the Thames frozen? Are the two figures skating on mirror-like blue ice? The painting's title 'Walking on Water' answers these questions. No: the Thames isn't frozen nor are the two figures skating. These tiny figures, dwarfed in scale by the bulk of the buildings and by the expanse of the river, are, on the left, Peter, and on the right, Jesus.

To repeat three key words Mark used in his sermon on the parables two weeks ago – 'My, what a mystery and surprise!' What message is being hidden in this painting?

Roger Wagner is a master of juxtaposition. Many of his paintings mix biblical and modern scenarios. He wants the viewer to think of the biblical message as being relevant, to see it in the familiar things around us. It's as relevant to us today as it was to people of the bible's own times.

But, more than that, in his art Wagner makes a point about time. God's time. God's time, Wagner is saying, is different to our sense of time.

God's time is not linear – God's time and God's kingdom embrace everything, throughout time and space. The contemporary world we know, depicted in this painting with power stations, gasometers and huge cranes is the same world in which Jesus lived, moved and had his being. And it's the same world in which Peter, like all disciples, attempts to respond to God's call and risks everything to be faithful but, inevitably, falters and falls. Thank God that Jesus' arms are constantly outstretched for us, in our vulnerability, to slip into.

As well as the contrast in time, there's also a huge contrast in scale. Commenting on both the contrasts of time and scale, Richard Harries, the former Bishop of Oxford and regular contributor to Thought for the Day, says this:

One of the features of Wagner's paintings is that the main figures are often barely noticeable against the wider urban scene or landscape. In the world's terms, the Christian faith is a hidden affair, and the deeper story of God at work seems marginal against the great power struggles of men and nations, perhaps epitomised here by the vast power station.

Yet it is this deeper story that matters - and perhaps it is, above all, the intense blue light that brings out the ultimate, transcendent significance of what is going on. The light gives an unearthly, surreal effect; what is happening is in time, but not our time. (*Church Times 21st March 2014*)

Do you hear echoes here of what we have been thinking about in sermons in the last two weeks? The kingdom of God is a mystery. The kingdom of God will always surprise us. The kingdom of God is hidden, located in small out of the way things – like yeast hidden in a huge quantity of flour; like a pearl hidden in a field; like the heavenly banquet of Communion capable of being enjoyed by all people – including the lost, the last and the least, being hidden in a meal of bread and fish, as in last week's account of the feeding of the 5000.

Harries goes on to note 'even the tiny details in the picture seem to take on a new significance: the arms of the crane like a cross, its weighted buckets, all beautifully balanced; the world held in equipoise; the gulls flying with joyous liberation; and the Thames itself with a deep, shining stillness.'

He concludes: 'Here, in *Walking on Water III*, the scene is, in one way, very figurative and physical, depicting two figures actually walking on the water of the Thames: but this Thames is all that threatens to overwhelm us. It is our world, but our world lived in the light of faith.'

And so now let's turn to the poem and marvel at the juxtapositions. [read the poem]

There is such an air of hope and confidence in the first six lines. At the end of the first line we know we are stepping onto the sea – but everything is OK. Safety is thrown to the wind. Freedom is found and it's exhilarating.

Endless trust between God and ourselves is offered. When we focus on God, says the poem – not deviating to right or to left - all will be well. As we step into the love that calls us.

But in line 7 the first signs of trouble emerge: the winds of fear and the waves of doubt are identified as realities we must live and contend with. But even then, God is still constantly calling us on, through time and eternity.

And our walk of faith is one of mystery, surprise and, says the poet at the end of line 9 'astonished joy'.

And, the reality of human existence catches up with us. Like Peter, everyone falters and falls – but there is one final juxtaposition. Sink as we might, the fear of being submerged and drowning is needless – a false alarm. For, in the final line, even as we sink, we discover the grace of God coming to support and save us in the 'everlasting arms'.

Mark finishes this look at walking on water by encouraging us to reflect on the painting and the poem as much as we are able to in this strange time. Whilst we may not have had the same experience that Mark has had this week of crossing water to stir our imagination and encourage our reflection, he hopes that the painting and poem may develop and deepen our desire to trust in God's presence, respond to God's call and take risks for the building of his mysterious, surprising and frequently hidden kingdom, always assured that no matter when and where we falter and fall, God's arms of love are outstretched to hold us.

Amen

Sarah Thomas 8 August 2020