

20-07-97 AM - Truly the Son of God - Matthew 14:13-36

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Date: 20 July 1997

Preacher: Andy Prideaux

[0 : 00] This is the AM service on July 20th, 1997. The preacher is Andrew Pridot.

The sermon is entitled, Truly the Son of God, and is from Matthew chapter 14, verses 13 to 36. Heavenly Father, I pray that what I have to say this morning might bring glory to you and might be beneficial to all your people.

For I ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, the reading we're going to look at this morning was the one just on the video that we had read before, so perhaps it would be good to turn to that on page 796 of the Pew Bible.

It's Matthew 14, verses 13 to 36. Well, as you do that, I wonder if you could imagine with me that faith was a slab of ham.

[1 : 08] So each week you'd go down to the deli and ask for some nice cheese, 100 grams of black olives, and, oh yes, half a kilogram of faith, please. That should keep me going for a week or so.

Sound a bit strange? Well, I think it certainly does, but that's the way we often view faith, I think. I wonder if you've ever thought something like this.

I wish I had more faith. Our vicar seems to have so much of it. He's always talking about how this or that prayer has been answered or about how this or that passage of scripture is really speaking to him at the moment.

His faith is so strong. I wish I had faith like that. Well, maybe you're unsure in your Christian faith. When you ask other Christians about it, they say, well, you've just got to have more faith.

And you wonder, well, where do I get this stuff? If only it was as easy as going down to the deli and picking up some with the rest of the groceries. Well, the passage we have before us this morning from Matthew, I think, has a lot to teach us about faith.

[2 : 13] But it's not as easy as finding a verse that says X equals faith on the page. And really, when we look at it, this passage is all about Jesus and two of the most amazing miracles that he performed.

So what could these things have to do with faith? Well, let's look at this passage together. At the beginning of chapter 14, as we were reminded, we find that old paranoid Herod's up to his old tricks again.

It's had John the Baptist beheaded for daring to question his private life. And now having heard that there are certain similarities between what John did and what Jesus is now doing, he seems to have perhaps set his sights on Jesus.

It's little wonder then that John's followers go and warn Jesus perhaps that he should lie low for a while. At least that's what we find Jesus doing in verse 13, whether it's because of this or whether it's because he wants some time on his own.

This is one of his friends who has just died. We're not exactly sure. But it seems that because his time has not yet come to face the authorities, that he is now withdrawing from people into the wilderness.

[3 : 24] But the trouble with Jesus finding time on his own, as we often see in the Gospels, is that he's attracted such a large following, especially, of course, through his miracles, like those that we saw today, and also because of his teaching.

And here, of course, it's no exception. Even though he's withdrawn into the desert, literally thousands, which we'll find out later, have journeyed out from the surrounding towns believing that he will heal their sick.

And we read, of course, in verse 14, that having compassion on them, Jesus cured their sick. Well, at the end of the day, it would have been a very heavy time of ministry for Jesus and the disciples, perhaps.

And we discover in verse 15 that the disciples were also concerned for all the people. Here you've got at least 5,000 very tired and smelly people, lots of people perhaps very much in need of a radox bath.

But Peter's main concern, his chief concern, or the disciples rather, is that they were hungry. How are they going to feed all these people? What strikes the disciples here is the sheer impossibility, humanly speaking, of feeding so many people.

[4 : 39] So we read in verse 15, Well, I wonder how will Jesus respond to the disciples' request?

He's already shown himself to be a great miracle worker. Perhaps this is a silly thing for the disciples to ask. I mean, what's he been doing all day with him than curing people from their various illnesses?

Perhaps we might expect Jesus to tell them off and then show up their lack of faith with a great miracle. And in a way, that's what Jesus will do. But I think perhaps he's doing more than this. Listen to his response to them in the next verse. He said to them, They need not go away. You give them something to eat. You give them something to eat.

Is Jesus crazy? What he's asking the disciples to do is impossible for them. I think that's what their response is in verse 17, quite rightly.

[5 : 50] They replied, We have nothing to eat. We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish. Let's leave Jesus' intriguing response on the back burner for a while as we go on to look at this miracle.

One of the interesting things about the miracle is that it is reported by Matthew in such a matter-of-fact way. Literally, it might read like this.

Having ordered the crowd to recline upon the grass and taking the five loaves and two fish and looking up to heaven and giving thanks, he broke them and gave the bread to the disciples and the disciples to the crowd and everyone ate and they were satisfied.

And of the leftover broken pieces, there were twelve baskets full and the men eating numbered about five thousand apart from the women and children. The first thing to notice here is that there is no doubting that this is truly a miracle.

As Warwick reminded us at the start, the Gospel writers were so impressed by it that it appears in every Gospel. It's the only miracle, apart from the resurrection, which does appear in every Gospel.

[6 : 59] Not only did the people eat, but we read that they were satisfied and there were leftovers, twelve baskets full. But Matthew tells a story just like Jesus was the host at a dinner party.

So effortlessly does he provide all this food out of nothing for every person seated there. Indeed, the word sit here is the verb to recline as people would perhaps at a Roman dinner party.

So we have this picture of Jesus, the great host who has provided an extravagant banquet of mammoth proportions. You might ask, what's so extravagant about bread and fish?

Well, we remind ourselves that bread was a staple for people in these times and often in the Old Testament the bringing of bread symbolised the end of a drought. Here then was a sign of God's abundant blessing coming directly from the hands of Jesus.

But more than that, do you remember where they were? In the desert. The idea of bread in the desert was highly significant for God's people. We remember the miracles of Moses and Elijah and Elisha where bread was provided.

[8 : 15] There also seems to have been the popular expectation that when Messiah came, once again, bread would rain from heaven as in the time of Moses and Israel in the desert.

Well, did you notice after Jesus has told the crowd to sit down that he gives thanks? This is what the words mean here. He expresses a dependence on his heavenly father that was clearly seen right throughout his ministry.

I think that even in this action he is pointing the people away from themselves to God and his provision. But Jesus is not merely an example of faith here.

For in the end, through this great miracle, he is pointing to himself. For this miracle is a signpost that points in only one direction, straight to Jesus.

For they find that he is a real provider, the real sustainer, and he is extravagant in his provision. Here is Messiah.

[9 : 22] Here is the Lord. Well, let's go back to Jesus' response in verses 15 to 18 for a moment.

I think the problem with the disciples, and we can perhaps understand, I mean, this is an impossible thing that Jesus asked them to do, but their problem was not a lack of faith. They had plenty of faith in what the towns around about could provide and what the people's money could buy them.

Now, their problem was not a lack of faith, but that this faith was misplaced. Think about this picture. They were with Jesus. They'd been with Jesus for a long time now.

They'd witnessed his deeds of power and of love, even on this day. Yet they did not think to turn to him in their time of need. Now, of course, we wouldn't be so foolish as to do this, would we?

Well, I'm not so sure. It's amazing that even as Christians, God often becomes the last resort for us when we're in trouble. I think of the times, for example, when I've been struggling with my faith, perhaps.

[10 : 29] So I'm busy around reading books. Sure, I might say a quick prayer about it, but I'm probably not convinced that it's going to be answered. Then I go to speak to someone who'll give me some wise counsel.

There's nothing wrong with these things, but it's no surprise that if it's a good book and if they're a wise counsellor, they won't tell me to look into my faith or try and find within myself the confidence or the strength that I need.

Now, this is what's caused my problem in the first place. Now, rather, they'll ask disturbing questions like these. Well, have you talked to God about it? Have you been reminding yourself of the love and commitment of Jesus to you?

That is, they tell me what I've known all along but fail to do because I've been busy trying to work out how I was going to solve the problem.

And like a pair of pliers, I find that God bends me out from being focused on myself so that instead I look to Jesus. Well, getting back to the passage, isn't that what Jesus is inviting the disciples to do here when he says in verse 16, they need not go away, you give them something to eat.

[11 : 41] Now, he doesn't want to see if they can perform a great miracle and then seeing that cat says, oh, well, I better perform another one, I guess. Now, having recognised their own inability, isn't Jesus inviting these people to come to him?

Isn't he inviting them to stop wondering what they're going to do with these measly five loaves and two fish and simply hand them over to him? Well, if they couldn't make this connection between their helplessness and his power and will to provide what they needed, he makes the connection for them.

He said, bring them, that is the loaves and the fish, bring them here to me. I know you don't know how this is going to work or even what I could possibly do.

Just come as you are to me. Hand this situation, this dilemma, even your life with all its contradictions and impossibilities over to me. I think he's teaching them that it is his job to give, that is something about himself and theirs simply to receive.

He's teaching them to have faith in him. But as we know from the next miracle story that comes right on the back of this one in Matthew, Jesus had more to teach them.

[13 : 09] After the feeding of the 5,000, probably to avoid the crowd's desire to make him a king as they define it, we can understand that from the context in John's Gospel.

In verse 22, Jesus sends the disciples away in their boat and then dismisses the crowds. Now, finally, Jesus does get a chance to be on his own and he spends it praying as he often did.

However, in the time that it has taken for the people to disperse, a great storm has developed and we read in verse 24 that it beat against the boat so that the disciples were in danger of losing their lives.

In Matthew's Gospel, we've already heard a story of where Jesus calms a storm. On this occasion, we know that he walks out on the water towards their boat to help them.

And we're told the exact time that this occurred. Our translation says the early morning, but it's literally the fourth watch between 3 and 6 a.m. I find that detail interesting because how could the disciples forget the time at which such a great miracle happened?

[14 : 18] But as they see this figure walking out towards them, I think their reaction is quite normal. When they saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, it's a ghost.

And they cried out in fear. Well, Jesus calms them with these words, take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.

Literally, he says, I am. But we'll come back to that later. Almost as amazing as this miracle are Peter's words in verse 28.

Peter answered him, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. Peter shows some faith here.

Perhaps he's coming to recognise that for his Lord, all things are possible. At least he has enough trust in Jesus to step out of the boat into a life-threatening situation, being confident that Jesus' word, his command to come to him, will enable him to walk on water towards the Lord.

[15:25] And of course, we know what happens. Peter begins the walk, but he soon becomes aware of the wind blowing against him, perhaps the water lapping at his feet, and that with his understanding of physics, water doesn't usually hold up a sturdy fisherman.

That is, he becomes aware of everything else apart from Jesus. And so his faith in Jesus' command is replaced by fear of the threatening circumstances that surround him.

His eyes are no longer fixed solely on his Lord, and so he begins to sink. Well, what about us?

Think like Peter when things have gone well. Remember, he's just witnessed the miracle of the feeding of the multitude. Perhaps it's easy to walk with Jesus in the path that he calls us on, even if it's a slightly unusual path in the strength of his word.

But life rolls on and we get sick or people around us get sick or even die. There are family problems. Work is hard.

[16:38] There's too much of it or not enough or perhaps worse still, none at all. These are just some things, but there are many things which can threaten our confidence in the Lord.

And as our mind becomes increasingly filled with these things, we find that it is not filled with thoughts of Jesus. And of course, we find ourselves sinking under the weight of these things also. Ironically, the first question we often ask in these times is where is God in all this? Well, in Peter's case, the wind and the waves had always been there.

So had Jesus. The problem was that he had temporarily forgotten the one who had called him and literally called him out of the boat. Well, what will Jesus do this time?

And what can Peter do now? Well, he cries out, Lord, save me. And we read in verse 31 that Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, you of little faith, why did you doubt?

[17:50] Well, the first thing I want to notice in this verse here is that although Peter is a person of little faith, there is genuine faith. He's in a desperate situation and he knows it.

But he doesn't call back to the disciples in the boat to throw him alive. He doesn't try and swim or struggle back to the boat. No, Peter cries out to the one who alone, who he knows alone, can save him or can help him.

Lord, save me. And please notice that Jesus does not despise this faith as small as a mustard seed. In his love, he responds immediately, reaching out his hand and pulling Peter up out of the water.

In a way, this feeble, if you like, or weak or desperate cry for help is a picture of the heart of faith. For Peter realised that he was in a desperate situation.

He had nothing to offer in exchange for his life. He was helpless. But he also recognised that he had everything to receive from the hand of Jesus. So often we view faith in exactly the opposite way to this, perhaps like a bowl full of things that we must bring to God and say, here God, here is my faith.

[19:10] Accept me on the basis of this. Or here is my exchange for your acceptance of me.

Because I think from this passage and indeed all through the Bible, we find that faith is rather like the picture of our empty hands that we might not even be able to hold out to God and the cry, Lord, I have nothing.

Please fill them. That is the cry of faith. This story is a great encouragement because it teaches us we don't have to have great faith in a sense.

Just faith that says, I'm in a hole, I have no one to turn to. Please help me. But Jesus is wanting to stretch Peter's faith and wanting to increase his faith and he says to him, you of little faith, why did you not believe?

See, Peter needed to go on trusting Jesus, to go on believing that Jesus could not only start him out on the journey, literally this little journey from the boat to him on the water, but also bring him safely to the end.

Well, earlier when Jesus made himself known to the disciples, remember he said, or referred to himself as I am. And you'll know that this is the way that the Lord referred to himself or revealed himself to his people in the Old Testament.

[20 : 37] And we know when we read through the Old Testament that the Lord has always been in the business of saving people. Listen to these words of David in Psalm 18 as he thanks God for his deliverance from his enemies.

He reached down from on high, that is the Lord reached down from on high. He took me, he drew me out of mighty waters, he brought me out into a broad place, he delivered me because he delighted in me.

Now having witnessed Jesus do what only the Lord could do, they responded to Jesus' action with the only right response, indeed the response they would give to the Lord himself.

We read verse 33, those in the boat, it says after the storm was still, worshipped Jesus saying, truly you are the Son of God. They worshipped him.

well, as for the disciples, these stories, as I said before, point us in one direction, to a person, to Jesus.

[21 : 46] But they also point us to the greatest act of salvation, that again, the greatest act of rescuing, that again, only God could achieve, of course, through Jesus' death and resurrection.

resurrection. This is our God who reaches down to us, stretching out his arm that is not so short that it cannot save and strong enough that it can hold us secure to the end.

These stories are bracketed with a record of sick people coming to Jesus to be made well, seeing that they have nowhere else to turn apart from him. And I think the disciples and we are taught through these miracles that in a sense we're just as needy as those people who were ill and that along with them then they can only be met in Jesus, the Son of God.

Well, growing up in a Christian family and going to church you hear these stories many times and often, sadly enough, despite them it's hard to have faith in God, isn't it?

often there are many things which seem to militate against us having faith in God either without or within ourselves. And I know that when I struggle in this way what I need is not somebody to tell me to have more faith.

[23 : 14] I need somebody to tell me about Jesus, to help me get my eyes off of myself, to help me to fix my gaze somewhere else, to tell me about his gospel, of his perfect love and mercy and of his sovereign power to save and to keep me safe forever.

My prayer is that God's word this morning again might be like a pair of pliers that God uses to bend us out of our preoccupation with ourselves that so often results in despair, to fix our eyes only on Jesus who is the author and the perfecter of our faith, to embrace the forgiveness he offers and the kind of life that he would enable us to live if we would only surrender to him.

Let us pray. Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you that your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, is a saviour to the helpless.

Please keep our eyes fixed on him so that being confident of your love and strengthened by the Spirit of Jesus at work in us, we might attempt great things for you and continue in him forever.

This we ask for the glory of your name. Amen.