

Today's gospel is one of the most well-known accounts of Jesus' works of power: walking on the water. This is found in Matthew, Mark and John, but not in Luke. This means that either Luke wasn't interested in recording the story – which seems highly unlikely – or he did not have access to the material that Matthew, Mark and John did. The content of the gospels didn't just drop out of the sky entire and whole: they are works of editing, collating and arranging and have many different sources, both oral and written. For about sixty years after Jesus died, stories would have been told about him by story-tellers in the market-places and squares, as well as – in the beginning, at least – the synagogues. They would have been arranged by theme, to make memorising and reciting them easier: the parables all together in one block, then the miracles, the moral teaching and finally the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus as one single story to be told.

It was only gradually that the evangelists began to write these stories down and combine them with other sources that provided written material on the life and teachings of Jesus. The fact that three of the gospels – including John, who is usually considered a gospel apart – have the story of walking on the water, means that there must certainly be some substance behind it. And why not? As C.S. Lewis observed, the miracles of Jesus do not suspend the laws of nature – they only show us how very little we know about them. I do not wish to 'explain away' Jesus multiplying loaves

and fishes or walking on the lake – I do not want it ‘explained away’ because I don’t have a problem with it. I not only believe it, I embrace it. I embrace it because I want the golden shafts of light from the world of miracle and wonder to break through the clouds and shadows of everyday ordinariness; in fact, it is only in the clouds and shadows that we will ever see the light. It is only within the temporal and the finite that we ever feel the touch of the eternal and the infinite.

*Of course* Jesus walked on the waters of the lake.

And yet there is another way, too, of understanding this story. It is to see it as a spiritual reality within ourselves. Jesus is master of the wind and the sea and, looking at this as a symbol, a visual metaphor, we can say that Jesus calms the emotional and psychological storms within our souls. Water has been a symbol, a visual metaphor of the emotions, for thousands of years – and turbulent waters mean an upsurge of emotions that sometimes almost drown us. A popular hymn in the 80’s has the words:

“Just as you calmed the wind and walked upon the sea, conquer, my living Lord, the storms that threaten me.”

I came across what I think is a really appropriate prayer from the service of the Mennonite Brethren – who were, and still are – a Lutheran sect that began in Prussia but spread far afield as India and Thailand. It goes like this:

“The worst storms, Jesus, are the ones caused by our fear, when we grow afraid of losing our power, or we grow

suspicious of the power of others, when we refuse to acknowledge your mysterious authority. Yet, it is in the storm that we find our capacity to love. In releasing our weak claim to power and opening ourselves to your sovereignty, we discover a new way of seeing ourselves – as called, and as beloved – and our neighbour, whoever they may be, as dignified, precious and loved. Here, in the middle of the storm, Lord, we need you and we need each other, and the love you give us to share. You will lead us through sacrifice and self-giving to peace and calm, if only we will loosen our hold on the tempests of fear.”

Sadly, the Mennonites were persecuted and killed by both the Catholic and Protestant authorities. They number only about 500,000 in the world today.

Yet, as this Mennonite prayer suggests, we have all known moments of anger so great that we were almost beside ourselves, even possessed by it; we have all experienced at some time during our lives the storms of jealousy, envy, lust, fear, anxiety and resentment. It cannot be otherwise, because we are all human beings. This is the nub of it: when Jesus said to Peter: “Man of little faith, why did you doubt?” I would probably have answered: “Because I’m human and I can’t help it.”

Finally, we must note one more element in this story: Jesus’ invitation for Peter to trust him is completely personal. Not all of the disciples jump into the water and Jesus doesn’t call them all to do so – that would make a rather comical

sight, I think. It is significant that the Lord's invitation is personal and individual, because that's exactly how it is with each one of us. Whether it be the outward storms of fear and uncertainty in this world we live in, or the inner tempests of uncontrollable emotions, passions and desires, Jesus is the one who holds out his hand for us to grasp. He is Master of all turbulence, outer or inner.

And it doesn't matter how we envisage the Lord in our hearts (because that's where he is to be found and only there): whether it be the historical Jesus, or the Beloved, or the icon of God, or the Crucified Lord, the supreme Friend – we will all have our own images to which we relate and that's how it should be, because each of us is unique. I have a friend who, in a time of personal crisis, experienced Christ coming to him in the form of a tiger. The particular form in which the divine Lord enters our heart isn't something that someone else has told us it should be, or what the Church expects, or what we're taught the scriptures say: it is ours alone.

Every image we have of him is both hopelessly inadequate and completely acceptable. The Lord loves the inadequate because there is more room for him. The Lord is deep within us, nowhere else, and it is the Lord within us – however we conceive him to be – who holds out his hands when the storms threaten to overwhelm us.