

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A while ago a friend of mine recounted one of his favourite stories. It's called 'The 18th Camel' and I would like to share it with you.

A certain Arab had three sons. When he died, he left in his will clear instructions about dividing up his property between them. Everything was quite straightforward, except for the camels. Of these there were 17, and the will said that half were to go to the eldest son, a third to the middle son, and a ninth to the youngest son. And the sons soon discovered that this didn't work. Try as they might, whether they divided 17 by 2, 3 or 9, they always ended up with amputated camels. Finally, in desperation, they went to a neighbour, an old friend of their father's, and asked his advice. The old man smiled and said 'But it's all very simple. I will lend you one of my camels. Then you will find that it comes out all right.'

So he did, and of course once they had 18 camels it was simple enough: the eldest son took a half, making 9; the second son took a third, that was 6; and the youngest a ninth, that was 2. $9+6+2$: that made (and this is the point) 17 camels in all. The neighbour then took back his own camel, and everyone was happy.

There are many situations in life where we need an 18th camel, or need to be one. The doctor treats us when we are ill, and then fades from the scene. The midwife helps in the period leading up to the child's delivery, but once the baby is safely born, she disappears. The counsellor spends as much time as is needed with someone struggling to come to terms with a traumatic event in their life, but once she is satisfied that they are through the worst, she quietly steps back. In fact it is important that they do know when to leave the scene. If the doctor, the counsellor and the psychiatrist, do not know when their job is done and do not allow themselves to fade away at that point, all that will be created is a dependence, or transference of needs, which can make all the problems far worse. They need to know how to be the 18th camel.

Many times Jesus tried to cure his disciples of over-dependence upon his always being there, as a kind of safety-net and security-blanket rolled into one. We see something of that in Gospel reading this morning. It tells us what happens immediately after the feeding of the five thousand. The text says that Jesus 'made' his disciples embark in their boat and cross Lake Galilee to Bethsaida whilst he himself addressed the needs of the remaining folk until he could go up the hillside to pray.

But from his vantage point he sees the disciples getting into difficulty, labouring at the oars against a head-wind, and so he comes towards them, walking across the water until he reaches the boat. They take fright at his appearance, believing the figure in front of them to be a ghost, until Jesus calls out to them “Fear not, it is I.”

Peter then shouts to him, ‘Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.’ And Jesus does so, - he simply says “come;” and Peter begins to walk on the water too. However, when he sees the waves whipped up by the wind, fear takes hold and begins to sink. ‘Lord, save me’, he cries, and Jesus catches him by the hand with the words ‘O man of little faith, why did you doubt?’ [Matt. 14: 22-32].

Jesus then steps into the boat with Peter and as they join the other disciples, the wind drops and peace is restored. Having been rescued in this way, the disciples worship Jesus in awe and wonder.

Time and again the disciples are rebuked for their little faith. When they are unable to cure the epileptic boy, Jesus cries out in exasperation: ‘O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to bear with you?’ [Matt. 17 14-21]. The disciples still do not understand: ‘Why could we not cast the demon out?’

‘Because of your little faith’, he replies. ‘For truly I say to you, if you have faith as small as a grain of mustard seed ... nothing will be impossible for you.’

However, long we have been part of the Christian family; however deep our faith has become, like the first disciples, we can experience times of doubt, uncertainty and fear.

Illness, bereavement, natural disasters, worrying news from around the world can all cause us to say “where is God in all of this?” or “Why is God allowing this to happen?” Often when we put on the television news or read the newspapers, we can feel totally helpless, and from a human perspective, the issues that so many are facing seem hopeless.

It can often feel as though we are being battered by a storm. The wind and waves are raging around us. It feels as though we are going to be engulfed by the situation or events that we see ourselves in. Fear and doubt can take over, as they did for Peter as he stepped out on the water.

However, Thomas Merton once said ***“The man of faith who has never experienced doubt is not a man of faith.”***

It is often in our times of doubt, in our struggling to make sense of things, that we discover that God is there to support us, and to guide us, just as he was for Peter that night.

The experience of many, is that faith and trust is made all the deeper, by having to work through doubts and anxieties. It is then that we discover we are not alone. God really is with us. Like Peter, Jesus calls us to step out in faith. Despite our fears and doubts, he calls us to place our trust in him, and metaphorically “walk on the water.”

That water could be the water of cynicism and ridicule, as we put our faith into practice despite digs and jibes by family or friends.

It might be the rough waters of broken relationships, that could so easily cause us to sink into a state of sadness and despair.

It could be the waters of temptation that threaten to engulf us in attitudes and behaviours that we know are wrong.

We could multiply these examples, but the basic point is that each of us is at one time or another in our lives faced with difficult circumstances that can challenge our faith. At these times, Jesus calls us to “walk on the water,” to place our trust in him and step out in faith.

At these times we can draw courage from the example of Peter – who represents each one of us, when we are caught between faith and doubt. Peter set out to obey Jesus, but as soon as he felt the force of the wind and the waves – his faith began to fail him. Jesus’ rebuke – “Man of little faith – why do you doubt?” is directed at us too. Like Peter, we often start out courageously, only to loose heart when things get difficult.

As followers of Christ today, we have to contend with an outer struggle against the elements – that is the events and circumstances around us, and also an inner struggle against our own fears and doubts. In a way, the whole Christian life, is a kind of “walking on the water,” in so far as it means walking in faith, and placing our trust in the love of God which surrounds us and upholds us at all times.

Joy Cowley, in her book, *Psalms from Down Under* has written a meditation reflecting on this tension between doubt and faith, the tension between stepping out in faith and staying on solid ground, the tension between responding to the voice of the heart and the voice of the mind.

I would like end by sharing this with you now...

It is called “***Tension.***”