

What's the difference between a ship and a boat?

I got a tip-off as I was preparing this sermon that one of your vergers here at Bristol Cathedral has quite a background in maritime pursuits – she's actually an American, like I am, and we Americans can get a bit testy when folks call things by the wrong name, so for Louisa's sake, I want to make sure I get this right: the difference between a boat and a ship is that you can fit a boat on a ship – a ship can carry a boat, if you like, but not the other way 'round. You can row a boat; you can't row a ship. It's important to get this right, not just to stay in Louisa's good graces, but also because here in Bristol, as you all know much better than I do, boats and ships and the legacy of maritime endeavors matter quite a lot. In that aspect, Bristol and Portland Oregon, the city where we American visitors come from, are quite alike. Portland is about the same size as Bristol, about 500,000 people; we're both cities noted for our commitment to environmental sustainability and for our emerging "foodie" culture. But perhaps most significantly, at least given this morning's story from Matthew's gospel, both of our cities have been largely defined by the role boats – ships too, but primarily boats – have played in building the particular culture and ethos that define us. Portland and Bristol are shipping cities. Boats matter here.

They matter so much to you here at the Cathedral that you've got the image of a boat smack in the middle of your coat of arms – it's there right on the cover of your bulletin this morning, and it shows up all over this Cathedral. And that's no surprise, really, because for thousands of years, the boat has been a symbol not just of the city of Bristol, but of the community that gathers to worship in Jesus' name, the Church. It's a symbol that goes back to the earliest days of Christianity; the church was compared to Noah's ark, the boat and the anchor were early symbols for the bishop's signet ring. And, as we know, the very space you're sitting in this morning, this long nave that stretches all the way back to the west doors, is a word that comes from the Latin *navis*, which literally means boat or ship. That's actually the word that is used in the Latin translation of the text we read this morning. Jesus' disciples are sailing in a *navicula* and this morning you all are sitting in a *navicula*, the great boat of the church, probably so-named because of the ceiling above you which looks very much like the bottom of a boat. So when Jesus' disciples are straining against the oars, early Christian writers would have seen an allegory for their fledgling community, gathered together in a vessel that is being continually tossed upon the waves, guided by a savior who is always one step ahead of them out on the waters, guiding them safely back home. In that sense, the image of the boat becomes an image of our journey through this life, the kind of naval pilgrimage we make over storm-tossed seas, until finally we come into the safe harbor of the life to come. The boat is our home, our shelter, our community, the encounter with fellow-passengers who journey with us through life.

And Peter steps out of the boat. Matthew's gospel is the only one that tells this particular story, where one of Jesus' disciples abandons the safety of his small community and follows his Lord out onto the dangerous waters of the raging sea. He's doing pretty well until he forgets the first lesson you learn when doing something dangerous, "don't look down!" and notices the wind whirling about him. Peter panics. "Lord, save me!" he cries, and Jesus does, but Peter earns a gentle rebuke from his teacher: "O you of little faith," Jesus says, "why did you doubt?"

It raises an interesting question – at least, I think it's interesting, and I'm the one who's up here in the pulpit. It's this: was Peter's mistake looking down and doubting that he could actually do what Jesus was doing? Or was Peter's mistake – the lack of faith for which Jesus rebukes him – the request to be able to walk on water in the first place? In other words, is Peter rebuked for his lack of

courage, or for his need for proof? Should he have just stayed in the boat and trusted that the apparition he was seeing really was Jesus after all?

The way we each one of us answer that question – I don't think the text is clear, actually, on this point, which means it's a site for all kinds of creative possibilities – the way we answer the question about where Peter went wrong will tell us a lot about what we think faith is in the first place: what kind of a faith we want to have, what kind of a faith we think we lack, maybe what kind of a faith we used to have but don't anymore.

If we understand faith as this kind of white-knuckled grip on the things we think we ought to believe and do in Jesus' name – these kind of miraculous things that don't always seem to make much sense in this world, things like “when Jesus tells me to walk on water I ought to be able to do it without any doubts or second-guessing” – if that's our image of faith, then, along with Jesus, we'll fault Peter when he looks down and has a momentary crisis; when his courage fails him and he starts to sink. In that context, faith and doubt become two polar opposites – one to be embraced against all odds, the other to be rejected at any cost. In that framework, the goal of the religious life is to be able to perform the miraculous: to walk on water. Just like Jesus.

But maybe faith is not simply a determined, courageous, confident belief in the miraculous. Perhaps faith has a much more pedestrian quality – something that has much more to do with how we live our lives from day to day, and much less with fantastic feats of strength and power. Maybe faith isn't walking on water at all. Maybe faith is making the decision, day after day, to stay in the boat.

What kind of faith does that look like? It sounds a little boring, to be frank. And that might be the point: it's a faith that asks us to resist the urge to be powerful and amazing and spectacular, and instead to embrace the moments in our lives when we do have fears and anxieties and a spectacular lack of courage. It means we leave the walking on water to the one who does it best – to Jesus – and embrace our own role as fellow-oarsmen, embedded in communities that both ask much of us and give us much in return. It means we embrace the relationships that have formed us, and resist the urge we sometimes have to chuck it all and head out on our own. In this way of reading the story, Jesus' rebuke to Peter – O ye of little faith, why did you doubt? – comes not as a response to his fears about crossing the water, but in failing to recognize Jesus in the first place. “Lord, *if it is really you,*” Peter says, “command me to come to you.” It may be that Jesus doesn't much care if we can walk on water or not. He does ask that we get better at recognizing him when he shows up, whether that's an incredible apparition, walking across water, something that makes no sense in our world, or whether it's the ordinary and boring moments that are ours to recognize each day of our lives. Jesus shows up in the most unlikely of places, we know this, right? He's next to us on busses and trains, in the inner-city streets of our most benighted cities and in the rarified haunts of the wealthy and powerful, in board rooms and government halls, in hospitals and prisons, in places of great anguish and places of great joy. In that sense, every moment of our lives is a chance to walk on water – to encounter Jesus on the stormy seas of a chaotic world, and in those moments, to take his hand and be escorted back onto the boat – that's where both Peter and Jesus end up, at the end of this story: Jesus walks Peter right back to his old seat in his old fishing boat, and sits him down. O ye of little faith, why did you doubt? Why did you feel the need to prove something specular to me? I don't need you to be spectacular, Jesus says. I don't need you to work miracles. I need you to stay in the boat, and do your darndest to work alongside your sisters and brothers in helping to steer it safely into harbor. The work of faith, then, becomes not the proof of belief we think Jesus demands from us, but a simple practice whereby we learn to recognize Jesus when he sits down right next to us, right where we are, huddled in life's *navicula*, the nave of the world, the very place where Jesus is wont to show up and maybe – just maybe – work an everyday, normal, boring old...miracle.