

## Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee, John 6. 15-21, Bethesda Coffee Morning, 14 August 2013.

As most, if not all, of you know, in recent weeks we have been looking at several of the miraculous signs performed by our Lord as recorded in John's Gospel.

I wouldn't expect you to have been keeping count, but this is in fact the fifth of the signs – and follows immediately after the feeding of the multitude – about which Len spoke to us last week.

For our reading, I will take up the story towards the close of that incident – of the so-called 'Feeding of the Five Thousand' – and will make a few comments as we read on ...

**When they** (the vast multitude) **had eaten their fill, Jesus told His disciples, 'Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing may be lost'. So they gathered them up and filled twelve hand-baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.**

**When the people saw the sign which Jesus had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"** Jesus, knowing that they were about to come and take Him by force (about to come and seize Him suddenly and violently) **that they might make Him king,** (Apart from the fact that many in Israel were always eager to throw off the yoke of Rome, this particular crowd were on their way to the capital city of Jerusalem for a great festival – that of the Passover,<sup>1</sup> which commemorated their liberation from another world empire many centuries before. Add to this that we know, from sources outside the Bible, that, at that time, many in the nation were incensed by the recent murder of John the Baptist,<sup>2</sup> and then, as evidenced by the miracle He had just performed,, Jesus seemed to them to be just the kind of Messiah they were looking for ... able to meet their every physical need ... so you can understand their intentions.

But, faced with this challenge, we read that Jesus ...) **withdrew to the mountain Himself alone.** (Matthew supplements John's account at this point by telling us that, first, 'He constrained (He compelled) the disciples to go on board ship, and to go on before Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowds'<sup>3</sup> – the word 'constrained' being a particularly strong one, this being the only occasion recorded where Jesus 'compelled' His disciples to do anything. For it is clear that they, His disciples, shared in the general enthusiasm and the popular desire to make Jesus a military monarch who would overthrow the Roman power. And so Jesus first asserted His authority to separate His disciples from the crowds. 'And when He had sent the multitudes away', Matthew tells us, 'He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray'.<sup>4</sup> Though the people regarded Him as a great prophet, and wanted to make Him a mighty king, He chose to take the part, as it were, of being a High Priest ... and to seek God's presence away from them all.)

**When evening came,** (our passage continues) **His disciples went down to the sea, entered into** (embarked on) **a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea was stirred** (became agitated) **because a strong wind was blowing.** (You could say that that night the sea was *roused from its slumber* by the great wind – a wind seemingly blowing from the west, the direction in which the disciples were heading. We can understand therefore why, in his gospel, Mark {doubtless leaning on the personal reminiscence of the apostle Peter} describes the disciples as 'toiling', as struggling - literally, as 'tormented', in rowing.<sup>5</sup> Not long before, these very men had suffered another great storm on that same sea, but then Jesus had been with them. And with His word He had rebuked the wind and the sea, so that the 'great storm' had become 'a great calm',<sup>6</sup> in response to which they had all 'marvelled, saying, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?"<sup>7</sup> How they must have longed to have had Jesus with them now.

John continues ...) **When they had rowed between two and a half and three and a half miles,** (At its broadest, the Sea of Galilee is about six miles wide, and so we can understand why both Matthew and Mark tell us that the disciples were now 'in the middle of the sea'.<sup>8</sup> Both of those writers tell us also that it was now between 3 and 6 o'clock in the morning.<sup>9</sup> Rowing as they were into the face of the fierce gale, they had travelled less than about three miles in some seven or eight hours. Because they were rowing, their backs were, of course, towards the front – the bow – of the boat, so that they were looking behind them ... and then ... through the darkness, by the light of the Passover moon, John recalled ...) **they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were afraid.** (And who can blame them? ... seeing the outline of a human form approaching them over the waves – with, I think we can safely assume, His robes flapping in the gale-force wind. But, while this is the first time that they saw Him since He had compelled them to leave Him on the shore, Mark tells us that when Jesus 'was alone on the land, He 'saw *them* toiling in rowing'.<sup>10</sup>

What a wonderful thought, that, though He had been out of their sight for many hours, they had not been out of His ... not for one moment. And that is equally true of everyone one of us.)

**But He said to them, 'It is I; be not afraid'.** (And I note that as all three accounts record those words,<sup>11</sup> they must have made a deep and lasting impression on every man in the boat.)

**Then they gladly took Him into the boat,** (to which Mark adds, 'and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded'<sup>12</sup>) **and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.**<sup>13</sup> In all likelihood, once the wind was subdued, it took them hardly any time to reach their destination.

I have no doubt that the disciples were familiar with several relevant passages from the Old Testament, passages such as (from the Book of Job) : God 'alone ... walks on the sea as on firm ground', and (from the Psalms) : 'Who is a mighty one like you, O Lord? ... You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them' ... and, speaking of mariners on the high seas, 'He (the Lord) delivers them from their distress; He makes the storm a calm ... and He brings them to their desired haven'.<sup>14</sup>

Surely, it would not have been hard for the disciples to make the connections! Having witnessed for themselves the Lord Jesus walking over a very stormy sea, in the face of a fierce gale, at night-time, and for several miles, then to find that no sooner had He entered the boat but that 'the wind ceased', it is small wonder that Matthew tells us that, at that point, 'those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God"'.<sup>15</sup>

As we noted on a previous week, the key verse of John's gospel is found towards its close ... 'truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name'.

And none of *us* are immune to the storms of life, to the difficult times when all seems dark around us. But, if we are Christians, we can rest in the knowledge that the Lord Jesus, though He has gone up on high, is even now engaged in untiring intercession for us, and assures us of His comforting and unfailing presence ... for, as we read, 'He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you". So we may boldly say: "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear"'.<sup>15</sup>

Back in the middle of the last century, an American Christian from Detroit – E. J. Rollings by name – wrote a pamphlet about Psalm 91.<sup>16</sup> Verse 1 of that Psalm reads: 'He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty'. Some time before,<sup>17</sup> Mr. Rollings wrote a gospel song which became very popular, the chorus of which at least will be known to some here ...

Are your crosses too heavy to carry,  
And burdens too heavy to bear;  
Are there heartaches and tears and anguish  
And there's no one who seems to care?

Standing somewhere in the shadows you'll find Jesus.  
He's the only one who cares and understands.  
Standing somewhere in the shadows you will find Him,  
And you'll know Him by the nail prints in His hands.

We read Jesus words, 'It is I; be not afraid'. But that mention of 'the nail prints in his hands' reminds me of something else which Jesus said ... not 'It is I' ... nor 'It is written' (although He did say that several times<sup>18</sup>) ... but His word cried loudly from His cross, 'It is finished'.<sup>19</sup>

*Prayer :*

*Done is the work that saves,  
Once and for ever done. (Horatius Bonar).*

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> John 6. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus.

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 14. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 14. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 6. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 8. 23-27; Mark 4. 35-39.

<sup>7</sup> Matt. 8. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 14. 24; Mark 6. 47.

<sup>9</sup> 'The fourth watch of the night', Matt. 14. 25; Mark 6. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 6. 47-48.

<sup>11</sup> Matt. 14. 27; Mark 6. 50; John 6. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 6. 51.

<sup>13</sup> John 6. 11-21.

<sup>14</sup> Job 9. 8 (Septuagint); Psa. 89. 9; Psa. 107. 29-30

<sup>15</sup> Heb. 13. 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> 'Within the Gates: Sixteen Messages on The Ninety-First Psalm', E. J. Rollings, 1965.

<sup>17</sup> 1948.

<sup>18</sup> Matt. 4. 4, 7, 10; 21. 13; 26. 31; Mark 7. 6; John 6. 45.

<sup>19</sup> John 19. 30.