

Now may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to talk today about faith, which seems an appropriate topic as we've just baptized Cosima, who now begins her lifelong journey of faith. That's one of the things we understand is going on at baptism. It's putting someone on the first step of that journey of faith.

Now, I know that some people might think that sounds a bit odd. Cosima is a bit young one would've thought to be starting any kind of journey on her own, but our journey of faith is not a journey for us to discover God. God's not lost. Our journey of faith is about discovering the God who made us and has already found us. It's finding our way back to God. Faith always begins with God, not us and our journey. Our faith, our journey of faith always begins with God and what he has done for us in Jesus Christ. Our faith is always a response to the God who first loved us. We don't find God. We're called to love a God who first loved us, and baptism is a sign for us of that grace. That's why we baptize infants because it's a sign that God was there first. Before we decided we wanted to find God, God was there first in the sacrament of baptism.

Cosima doesn't need to understand anything about God for God to seek her out in her baptism. God has already reached out to her. Our gospel story teaches us that faith is a response to God and God's love. And I'll pick out from that gospel story we heard two great characteristics of faith. But before speaking about that gospel that we've just heard about Jesus walking on the water, let me say something about the context of where that comes in the gospel. The story comes straight after Jesus has fed the 5,000. You might remember, he miraculously expanded upon the loaves to feed a huge crowd. This was the high point of Jesus's popularity. There was a clamor amongst the crowds that Jesus should become a leader, perhaps take on the political aspirations to get rid of the Roman rulers.

There was a febrile atmosphere and excitement around Jesus, and maybe that's why the passage begins with Jesus making the disciples to get into a boat to get away from all that excitement. He went alone to pray up the mountain. The disciples, he makes them get into a boat. So perhaps he's giving everybody the opportunity to settle down. That's how we get into this situation where Jesus is by himself, and the disciples are in a boat on a lake which gets caught up in a storm. What happens

next has long troubled biblical scholars, even those who don't have a problem thinking about, or aren't troubled by the miraculous or supernatural element of the gospel stories. Even they are troubled by this story.

The reason is that the miracle here of Jesus walking on the water seems to serve no particular purpose. When he fed the 5,000 by blessing, and the bread keeps on going and feeding all these people, well, at least he's feeding all the people for lunch. Similarly, when he turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana, it was to keep the party going. But what's going on here with Jesus just seeming to take a stroll on the lake? I think it's fair to say that whilst Jesus clearly could walk on water, he normally traveled by boats. So why walk on the water here? I don't think we'll ever know the answer to that question, but it does make me think about how faith is born in people, how people respond to Jesus and how he appears to people and how faith is born.

In my experience, when most people talk about how their walk of faith started or how faith became real and significant to them, often it's in rather prosaic terms. Well, I was brought up in a Christian home or something happened when I was a child or my grandparents said something to me, I had kind friends, and slowly my eyes were opened, and a journey of faith took on real momentum. And occasionally I meet people, however, who tell me very dramatic stories about how Jesus came to them in an extraordinary way out of the blue and faith was born. Jesus still comes to his disciples in different ways, some seemingly quite normal and prosaic, others dramatic. What we have this morning is definitely an extraordinary story.

So let me pick out two great characteristics of the life of faith that are seen in this story. The first characteristic is obedience. Not a popular word. I used to think that this story was a story of recklessness, but it's not a story which glorifies risk taking for its own sake. Jesus is not looking for bungee jumping, hang gliding, tornado chasing thrill seekers. Peter is not walking on the water here for recreational purposes. This is not a story about extreme sports. It's a story about extreme discipleship. When Peter sees Jesus walking on the water, he says, "Lord, if you command me to come to you, I'll get out of the boat." It was only when Jesus said, "Come," that he got out of the boat. This is not a story about recklessness. It's a story about obedience, about Peter responding to the call of Jesus. Peter answered Jesus's call.

To speak positively of obedience is to be profoundly countercultural. The valid suspicion of talk about obedience is grounded in our fear of authoritarianism. Obedience is confused with blind obedience. Obedience is confused with conformity, with going along without asking any questions. But the true meaning of obedience is responsiveness. It's related to the latter word *audire*, which means to hear, to listen, to respond. Obedience is not the surrender of responsibility, but the acceptance of responsibility for what we respond to and how. We all obey something. We all follow something. We all respond to certain things. We all put our faith in something. Why not obey the call of him who made us?

The second characteristic of faith that we see lived out in this story is courage. When Peter heard the call of Jesus to step out of the boat, it must have taken great courage to respond. This is not a flat sea. If you remember, there was a storm brewing. There are waves around the place, and yet, Peter stepped out of the boat. John Ortberg wrote a great book about this story. The title of the book was *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, which is true. If we want to grow, if we want to grow in faith, then we have to take risks. We have to have the courage to take risks and step out of the boat. Peter shows great courage here in this story.

Look at the rest of the disciples. When they first see Jesus, they're terrified. "Oh, it's a ghost," they said. They cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately spoke to them and said, "Take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid." And the phrase here, "It is I," is significant. In the Greek, that's *ego eimi*, which is a very important biblical phrase. It's the phrase that's used in the Old Testament when God appears to Moses in the burning bush and Moses says, "What's your name?" And God reveals the divine name as being, "I am who I am." That word, that phrase, "I am." *Ego eimi*. It's the name of divinity.

One thing we shouldn't miss in this story, the really amazing thing isn't what Peter was walking on. It's who he was walking with. That's the real amazing thing in the story. In Mark's gospel, when this story is being told, there's that phrase that, "Jesus intended to pass them by," it says. And again, we see an allusion to the Old Testament that we heard in our first reading, when God tells Elijah to go and wait in the cleft of the rock whilst I pass by. That phrase, "Passing by," is a phrase used of God, the divine passing by.

Peter's courage, his strength came from knowing the identity of the one who was calling him, the identity of the one who was with him. And if you were here last week when we were thinking about the story of the transfiguration, you'll see the same theme emerging, namely the revelation, gradually in the gospels, of the divine identity of Jesus. The disciples came to recognize Jesus for who he was, not just a great teacher. In the boat, the story ends with them worshiping him, naming him as the son of God.

Before wrapping up, I have one more thought to share on the subject of faith, and it comes from that reading in the Old Testament. There's a phrase in that reading, which has caused Bible translators more problems than any other phrase in the whole Bible. It comes about halfway through, and it refers to what happens after the fire. There was, it says, "The sound of sheer silence." And the problem with translating that word, that phrase, is how can you name the sound of silence? And you'll see, if you look at different translations of the Bible, there are lots of different options. It's impossible to describe the sound of silence. We can't describe it, but we recognize it when it comes.

So, it is with faith. Faith is a slippery thing. We might find it hard to name it, express it, talk about it, but we recognize it when it's there, when it's present, when we have it. Now, maybe there are some people here who couldn't say that they had faith, in which case I'd love to talk to you about that. But whilst we can't describe faith, the story here at least illustrates two great characteristics of faith, obedience, and courage. May we be granted that gift of faith and grow in obedience and grow in courage. Amen.