

Losing altitude; kia kaha

Readings: Psalm 69:13-18, 30-33, Matthew 14:22-33

When I was a child, I frequently had dreams that I could fly. Who else had such dreams? In my dreams I was flying just a few feet above the earth. My flight was like doing breast stroke in the water. It felt very peaceful and I joyful as I viewed the earth and people on it. I still dream like that occasionally and love the sense of serenity that comes with that 'flying' and seeing at a low altitude.

In an aeroplane, losing altitude can mean the plane will drop suddenly. The drop happens because of a downdraught. It feels very uncomfortable and scary too. If it's a sudden drop and oxygen masks come down, it's really frightening.

Of course losing altitude can lead to a crash. A plane crash usually results in fatalities. No-one wants to crash.

Most times losing altitude doesn't result in a crash. Losing altitude is rarely fatal and a good pilot will know what to do when it does. In fact, losing altitude is essential if we want to actually land on the ground in a safe way too.

Today we are continuing our series based on Bishop Justin's sermon about how to cope with life. We'll ponder his point that losing altitude is not the same as crashing and we'll consider that losing altitude can be a good thing.

Recently I heard a person describing someone as a person who could walk on water. Have you heard that expression before? It describes someone who is amazingly capable and seems to be able to do anything.

Jesus walked on water – literally. Jesus worked great miracles; related easily and connected meaningfully with so many people in his teaching and personal life. Jesus brought life to everyone he touched. Jesus is exceptional.

Peter is too – in a lesser way of course. Jesus calls Peter the "rock" of the church a couple of chapters after this incident. Mat 16:18

Peter isn't yet a rock if we take Matthew's Gospel as written in time sequence. Though he sinks like one. He tries to walk on water. He begins to sink; 'lose altitude'. Some say this story reveals Peter's failure but does it?

Who likes to sink? Who likes to feel foolish when everyone else is watching? Hands up!

Some of you like Facebook. Some of you hate it. I confess; I like it for staying in touch with friends and promoting causes and events. However it is very superficial. You can't be sure your fb friend is not suicidal just because his posts are always cheerful.

Some of us live our lives as if it was a succession of Facebook posts.

Everything is always fine. We don't want people to know life is tough. Or to think our faith isn't working like we pretend it is.

Back to the story: remember there is a terrible storm. If you were in a plane in a storm like this you'd probably crash unless you flew above it. In a boat you don't have that option. The boat is the only security you have.

Or is it?

What about the Jesus?

"Don't be afraid. Take courage. I am here" Jesus says. Somehow he makes himself heard and understood in the midst of howling winds and huge waves. Jesus was quick to comfort his friends. That comfort was tangible and courage inducing.

When Jesus said "Come" Peter suddenly felt bold; invincible even. "With Jesus I can do anything" he thought.

And he gets out of the boat, which was very little security in the storm, and heads towards Jesus.

Then the storm reminds Peter of its power.

Storms do that don't they? Life has a way of reminding us, right at the moment when we think we have it all together, that actually we don't.

And Peter, like many of us, began to sink. He lost altitude though it felt like he was going to drown.

Three Gospels tell this story. Only Matthew includes Peter's attempt to walk on the water.¹ Why is this important to Matthew?

Tom Wright notices that Matthew presents Jesus in a rich, many-sided way. He "invites us to learn the wisdom of the gospel message and the new way of life that results from it."²

¹ The Gospels that include the story are Matthew, Mark and John

² Matthew for Everyone, x



In Tom Wright's commentary he mentions the painting above³ and that very few great artists have painted this scene. Perhaps the facts that out of all the gospels only Matthew included Peter's participation and the fact that most great artists felt the whole scene didn't merit painting have something in common.

Perhaps it's what we talked about earlier; we don't like failure.

But who says it was failure on Peter's part? He did start to sink, or in Bishop Justin's words "lose altitude" to be sure. But does that mean he failed? I'd suggest that Matthew wants us to learn from Peter as well as Jesus.

Tom Wright again:

"Would you rather have a friend who did what seemed like the right thing and then worried about it later, or one who spent so much time thinking it all through that it would take weeks to get anything done?" ... Peter jumped out, gave it a shot, trusted the Lord actually."⁴

Peter wasn't totally submerged. He didn't drown. He didn't crash. When he was sinking, he called out to the Lord. Jesus rescued him.

³ Conrad Witz's painting of the scene described in the Gospel

⁴ Matthew for Everyone 190

The experience was part of his growth as a human being and as a Christ follower. He tried something. It didn't go the way he thought it would. But he came through it unscathed and the stronger for trying. In the midst of the storm Jesus was trustworthy.

What are the storms in our lives? What storms have we already been through? Looking back on those things, did you crash or did you just lose altitude for a while? Maybe you landed in a safe place after all?

Sometimes more than one storms comes.

Someone in a storm recently called me for advice. We talked. She had decided what to do. Later she told me later about another storm that was happening at the same time. That storm made her doubt her own judgement. One storm has gone but the other still rages for this woman. She knows it won't cause her to crash though.

Peter didn't face the elements alone. For a moment he felt alone. But Jesus was right there and grabbed him.

When Jesus said "You have so little faith, why did you doubt me?" his words were not just a rebuke as some suggest. They were also an encouragement.

We can't see Jesus' face or hear his tone of voice in the written words (which is why we should have a conversation rather than send an email btw).

I imagine Jesus' laughter as he spoke. "Peter, you crack me up. You need more faith buddy."

When we are on a spiritual mountain-top with God, feeling really blessed and loved and strong, it's easy to have faith. But we can't live on the mountaintop if we want to grow in the Lord. We have to lose altitude if we want to be real human beings.

The storms allow us to grow. Those are the times that we realise Jesus stands with us no matter what. And most often we don't crash.

We lose altitude. We take a hit and make mistakes. Bishop Justin said there will always be a dawn.

Tom Wright says 'The moment when we are most strongly tempted to give up is probably the moment when help is, if only we knew it, just a step away.'⁵

The advice for pilots when losing altitude suddenly in turbulence is not to fight to remain exactly at the assigned altitude. The best way is to let the altitude vary a little. Doing that places less stress on the aircraft and the pilot.⁶

It's the same if in quicksand. Fighting and stressing does more harm than good.

⁵ Matthew for Everyone 191

⁶ <http://www.airliners.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=750155>

Sometimes we are to just be. When life is hard maybe we reduce our activities; simplify things to focus on what is needful right now?

There are times for activity and times to rest and trust the Lord the best we can. Jesus told Martha,

“My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! 42 There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her.” Luke 10:41

Shortly after he said this, Lazarus would die. That was a storm for both sisters. Even in this they wouldn't crash. It felt like they might but help was at hand.

What storms are you facing now? Are you worried about crashing? Maybe you are simply be losing altitude? Perhaps the Lord has help at hand sooner than you think and is leading you to a landing place?

Let's try and keep our eyes on Jesus and our ears tuned for his encouragement and provision. Let's be willing to do risky things too, if he asks us to, even if we lose altitude as we do so.

Reflection questions:

As you reflect back on your life:

Have you had circumstances that felt like you were crashing?

What incidents/situations can you recall that were actually more like losing altitude?

As you consider the gospel story in Matthew 14:

How do you imagine Jesus felt as he invited Peter to come towards him?

How might Peter have felt initially and then as he began to sink?

What lessons might Peter have taken away from this incident?

How might you respond to what is the Lord saying to you in this story?