



Sermon preached by Dr Janet Bottoms on 9th August 2026

Readings: *Matthew 14: 22 -33; Romans 10: 5 -15.*

Trinity 10

There are some big words and some big themes in that passage from Paul's letter to the young church in Rome – and I can't help wondering how they reacted when it was first read to them. "What was that? Say that again!" Yet the words seem simple enough. "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

"Confess with your lips" – that just means say it out loud, doesn't it? Say it so people can hear you; but then there is that little phrase "believe in your heart". Well, yes: believing is more than just saying – but "believe in your heart"; and in the next sentence, "for one believes with the heart and so is justified. "Is that different from just believing something? Then, if we consult another translation, we find the word "faith" instead of "believe". Are they the same thing? And all that is before we come to "*justified*" and "saved" and "salvation".

Well, we can find our way through it all with a good commentary and a good will, but I don't want to do that here. Instead I want to turn to the story of Peter – our other lectionary reading for today – to see how this relates to what Paul is saying; and I will start with another question – a different kind of question.

The disciples are all together in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and Jesus is not with them. Why? Jesus has just concluded what we think of as the "miracle of the loaves and fishes", the feeding, in a lonely place, of five-thousand men, not forgetting women and children; "And immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds."

That's odd, isn't it? It surely puzzled his disciples, and though they obeyed they must have wondered why. What was Jesus up to? "And after he had dismissed the crowds" – and how easy was that, I wonder – "he went up the mountain by himself to pray." That's easier. It was Jesus's regular practice to go away by himself to pray, and here he was at the end of a day that had turned out very differently from what he had planned, but why did he send his disciples away first, before anything else?

We can find the story of this feeding miracle in the gospels of Mark and John, but John has a verse that may help to explain the ending as he writes, "When Jesus realized that they (i.e. the crowd) were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. This enormous crowd, thousands of men, not to mention the women and children, was very excited and things were moving more rapidly than Jesus expected or intended. He needed to get the disciples out of it before they could involve themselves in trouble; to persuade the people to calm down and go home; and, most of all, he needed to pray about it. So he withdrew. Then it was night. A headwind had got up; the disciples in the boat, halfway across the lake, were being battered by the waves and, early in the morning, Jesus came walking towards them on the lake. The disciples were terrified. At this point I think it may be helpful to remember an earlier occasion when they were in a boat in a storm and terrified. That time, Jesus was with them, but he was asleep, so they woke him up, crying "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" and he said to them "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?"

Questions again – questions on both sides. Why was Jesus still sleeping, the disciples must have been asking themselves. The boat was going to capsize. They were all going to drown. How could he sleep at such a time? Why wasn't he sharing in their terror with them? So they woke him. But Jesus's question is the opposite – "Why are you afraid?" – and notice he asks this before he calms the storm – "you of little faith". In the Greek language, in which the gospel writer tells us this story, Jesus puts the two words together – *oligos*, meaning "little", and *pistos*, faith or trust, – to make one composite – *oligopiste* – "you little-faiths".

It's a teasing little word, I think. He is not scolding. It is quite tender – but also gently challenging, because he is serious. Why are they such “*little-faiths*”? They have chosen to be with – to follow him. As Peter says on another occasion “Lord, we have left everything to follow you”, and it is true. He chose them, he called them, but they chose to follow him - and yet they are so easily frightened, so easily doubt him.

“Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a dead calm. And they were amazed, saying What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him? “ They demanded that he should “save” them - and were amazed when he did.

But let's return to our original story of the disciples alone in the boat and Jesus coming to them on the water. They cry out in fear and he immediately tells them not to be afraid. “It is I”, he says. Peter answers, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus simply replies “Come”, and Peter gets out of the boat and starts towards him.

What is in Peter's mind, we must surely ask - and it is worth noting that this part of the story appears only in Matthew's gospel, a gospel which tends to focus on Peter and his leadership. “If it is you”, he says, that is, not an apparition, not your ghost. Is he testing it/him? Or is he thinking of himself – “Let me do it, too. I'll show you. If you can, I can.”

Is this what it means to “believe in the heart”. Total confidence? Self-confidence? If so, it is quickly gone. Peter loses his nerve as soon as he sees, as soon as he feels the reality of his situation: his unprotected self – alone - in the middle of the waves; that moment of helpless terror so graphically voiced in psalm 42: “all your waves and your billows have gone over me”. Beginning to sink he cries out, “Lord, save me!” and immediately Jesus reaches a hand to him saying “*You little-faith, why did you doubt ?*” Then they are both in the boat, together - and this time the disciples worship Jesus, saying “Truly you are the Son of God”, the one who saves.

Does it take a moment like this for them to realise? Do they forget it again in the day-to-day business of ordinary life - or even doubt the experience? It is so easy to forget – so easy not to learn from such moments or experiences.

Had Peter forgotten it again when, on the night when Jesus and his disciples shared what would be their last meal together; after they have gone out to the Mount of Olives, and Jesus had said to them “You will all become deserters because of me this night”, Peter says “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” Peter the confident one - the one who always speaks first - before he thinks.

But Peter learns from his mistakes – learns and grows in faith when he is, finally, shaken out of his confidence – his belief - in himself. That moment after, in terror, he has denied three times even knowing Jesus, he goes out and weeps - “bitterly”.

That is when he faces his own reality in the very depth of his being, in his heart – that is, in the very core of what he is; not just his emotions – grief, shame - but his intellect, his desires, his driving will to speak, to act, to do. A different kind of “heart-belief” will fill its place when he meets the risen Christ; when the old Peter is transformed into the new one, no longer a “little-faith” though still recognizably Peter, the leader, the one who speaks first and speaks out.

That is the Peter who proclaims on the day of Pentecost that “this man whom you crucified . . . God raised up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.”

That is the Peter who – when the Jerusalem authorities order him not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus answers, “whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” This is Peter; still himself, still with the qualities that made Jesus call him and recognise his leadership of the other disciples, but now a leader with an unshakeable faith in the one who called him and loved him and restored and forgave him.

This is surely what it is to “believe with your heart” and “confess with your lips”, as Paul put it, and it is encouraging to all of us to know that faith is a dynamic quality; that we can grow – can “grow up” in faith. I understand that in Aramaic, the language the Jesus almost certainly spoke with his disciples, the word that can be translated as “little” can also mean “immature”. To be called a person of “immature faith” implies the possibility that it can grow – that a young, a “childish” faith -- (not child-like” which is different) has the potential to learn and grow to fullness and strength

It is this experienced, grown up, fullness of faith, along with the readiness to “confess it with your lips” even in the face of opposition or mockery, even in real danger, is, I think, what Paul means by believing “in your heart”. And this, says Paul, is what leads to “justification” – that is to being “reconciled” , or put into a right relationship with God. This surely is “salvation” – “rescued, healed, restored, forgiven” in the words of the old hymn – and not just in the present moment but in the future and for ever .

For, as Paul also writes earlier in his letter to the church in Rome: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. “

Amen. May it be so for all of us.

Janet Bottoms: 9th August 2026