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Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon : 9th Sunday after Trinity ~ August 13, 2017

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There was a man who did not believe in God. Late one stormy night, he was walking along a cliff top pathway, when suddenly a strong gust of wind caused him to lose his balance. He slipped on the wet grass and slid down the slope and over the edge. As he fell his outstretched hands managed to grasp hold of a protruding rock. There he hung, with his feet dangling in space, and the waves crashing on the jagged rocks far below. In his desperate plight he shouted: 'Is there anyone there? Is there anyone there?' To his surprise and delight he heard a deep, calm voice answering: 'Yes, I am here.' 'Please help me' pleaded the man. 'If you do, I will believe in you for the rest of my life.' 'Of course I will help you' came the reply. 'Just let go of your hold'. The man remained silent for a moment or two, and then shouted 'Is there anyone else there?'

The Gospel reading today gives us a vivid picture of God's utter reliability in the storms of life. He is always faithful to us – yet often our faith in God can seem small and easily shaken, particularly when bad news suddenly strikes. Things have happened to me which have frightened and scared me and shaken me – as I am sure they have happened to you – and at the time it feels as though the world has come to an end. Yet when everything has calmed down and we are able to look back with the benefit of hindsight, we can often see that God was there all the time.

*Another story. A violent storm hit a town and local officials sent out an emergency warning that the riverbanks would soon overflow and flood the nearby homes. They ordered everyone in the town to evacuate immediately. One man who was a Christian heard the warning and decided to stay, saying to himself, "I will trust God and if I am in danger, then God will send a divine miracle to save me." The neighbours came by his house and said to him, "We're leaving and there is room for you in our car, please come with us!" But the man declined. "I have faith that God will save me."*

*As the man stood on his porch watching the water rise up the steps, a man in a canoe paddled by and called to him, "Hurry and come into my canoe, the waters are rising quickly!" But the man again said, "No thanks, God will save me."*

*The floodwaters rose higher pouring water into his living room and the man had to retreat to the second floor. A police motorboat came by and saw him at the window. "We will come up and rescue you!" they shouted. But the man refused, waving them off saying, "Use your time to save someone else! I have faith that God will save me!" The flood waters rose higher and higher and the man had to climb up to his rooftop.*

*A helicopter spotted him and dropped a rope ladder. A rescue officer came down the ladder and pleaded with the man, "Grab my hand and I will pull you up!" But the man STILL refused, folding his arms tightly to his body. "No thank you! God will save me!"*

*Shortly after, the house broke up and the floodwaters swept the man away and he drowned. When in Heaven, the man stood before God and asked, "I put all of my faith in You. Why didn't You come and save me?" And God said, "Son, I sent you a warning. I sent you a car. I sent you a canoe. I sent you a motorboat. I sent you a helicopter. What more were you looking for?"*

One of the humbling privileges of being a parish priest is listening to the stories of people who speak of the joys and sorrows which everyone experiences at different times in our lives. Very occasionally there is the opportunity to offer some advice but more often it is enough to listen and to offer to pray – and pray to God, the loving, caring God in whom we believe.

It was a wise Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, who asked the question: 'Where is the emphasis in the Creed. Is it I believe in God? Or is it I believe in God? At the heart of Christianity, the most important thing is that there is a God to believe in.'

Many of you will know this familiar passage: *One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand. One belonging to him and the other to the Lord. When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times of his life. This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it. 'Lord you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me'. The LORD replied, 'my precious, precious child, I love you and I would never leave you! During your times of trial and suffering when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.'*

In a reflection on today's Gospel reading, the writer Susan Sayers puts it like this: 'Today God, through Jesus, is saying to each of us: 'Yes, it is OK for you to put your total trust in me. Just keep that in mind and all the things which make you feel frightened and insecure will not let you sink – you can walk straight over them, confident in my love and power.'

May that be so for each one of us as we walk, and sometimes wade, through the storms in our lives?