

St Andrew's Chesterton
Oil upon troubled waters
A sermon preached by Nick Moir on 8 July 2012

*When you're weary
Feeling small
When tears are in your eyes
I will dry them all*

*I'm on your side
When times get rough
And friends just can't be found
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down*

*When you're down and out
When you're on the street
When evening falls so hard
I will comfort you*

*I'll take your part
When darkness comes
And pain is all around
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down*

*Sail on Silver Girl,
Sail on by
Your time has come to shine
All your dreams are on their way*

*See how they shine
If you need a friend
I'm sailing right behind
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind*

It's about friendship. Paul Simon wrote it for his friend Art Garfunkel. Or at least he wrote two verses first, but then Garfunkel wasn't sure that he should sing it and thought Simon should and anyway there needed to be a third verse. If the first two verses were inspired by their friendship the irritation stirred by these negotiations led to a third verse that is about Simon's wife, Peggy Harper,

who had been noticing her first grey hairs: 'Sail on silver girl...' The first two verses are a beautiful testimony to the power and importance of friendship: 'I'm on your side...' Those lyrics speak as powerfully and enduringly today. Sadly, though, the very process of bringing the song into being was too much for the relationship between Simon and Garfunkel and that was the last album they recorded together before they split up. And Simon's marriage only lasted a few years more too: the Silver Girl had to sail on without him. It's a beautiful idea, the bridge over troubled water – like such a bridge 'I will lay me down', I will be there for you in troubled times so that you can depend on me, and walk over it so that those waters do not touch you. It's a beautiful idea, but somehow the reality of so many people's friendships and relationships doesn't quite reach that ideal. For earlier generations such longings for stability, rocklikeness, the fullness of love and acceptance would have found expression in a psalm or a hymn directed to God. Indeed that's where Paul Simon got his image from. "I'll be your bridge over deep water if you trust in me" was a line in the Swan Silvertones version of the spiritual 'Mary don't you weep'. The Mary is the brother of Lazarus, weeping at the death of her brother; the friend offering his support is Jesus: "I'll be your bridge over deep water if you trust in me".

Many of us are blessed with deep and wonderfully supportive relationships, some are marriages, some friendships. But even the best of these can suffer from having too great a weight of expectation on them. I suspect that our Western culture's loss of faith in the eternal has actually put more pressure on our other relationships and often they can't take that strain. Having a relationship with God, a deep and living faith in Jesus Christ, does not endanger or diminish our human loves but can actually protect them. And if you this morning feel disappointed by the love of others, unsupported and on your own then hear the voice of Simon & Garfunkel's song as the divine voice:

When you're weary
Feeling small
When tears are in your eyes
I will dry them all

I'm on your side
When times get rough
And friends just can't be found
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down

There is, of course, a much older and actually richer expression: not being a bridge over troubled water but pouring oil upon troubled water or waters. Nowadays when we think of pouring oil on waters we are thinking of tankers, spills and ecological disaster. But that's thinking the wrong kind of oil and in the wrong kind of quantity. The ancients knew that a little oil could calm a large volume of water. In 1762 Benjamin Franklin repeated an experiment of Pliny and he wrote:

"At length being at Clapham, where there is on the common a large pond which I observed one day to be very rough with the wind, I fetched out a cruet of oil and dropped a little of it on the water. I saw it spread itself with surprising swiftness upon the surface; but the effect of smoothing the waves was not produced; for I had applied it first on the leeward side of the pond where the waves were greatest; and the wind drove my oil back upon the shore. I then went to the windward side where they began to form; and there the oil, though not more than a teaspoonful, produced an instant calm over a space several yards square which spread amazingly and extended itself gradually till it

reached the lee side, making all that quarter of the pond, perhaps half an acre, as smooth as a looking glass."

That expression, pouring oil on troubled waters, came into my mind when I read this morning's gospel reading. 'They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.' Now however you understand what the disciples were doing in casting out demons it is about disturbance, turbulence of mind and spirit, and bringing and restoring calm. Troubled lives had the oil of healing poured upon them and that brought them peace. A little oil, a little prayer, a brief encounter brought transformation, hope, new beginnings.

I believe it still does. Anointing with oil in the bible was about the outpouring of the Spirit so that the one anointed would be changed from within. Last week we heard of David's first anointing by Samuel and it said that 'the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.' In today's reading the elders of Israel anoint him king over all Israel and, it says, 'David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him'.

But oil is also used in the bible for healing. It is still about the outpouring of the Spirit but this time not to inspire someone for a particular office but to pour oil upon the troubled waters within and to bring peace, wholeness and healing. Remember how last week I said that oil gets everywhere, somehow breaks through the tiniest cracks and through lids and finds its way into every part. Such is the work of the Spirit in healing.

We will in a moment be offering the ministry of healing – anointing and the laying on of hands, or both. If you come for anointing I will not expect you to say anything: the talking will be done by the oil pouring out the grace God upon you. Those ministering the laying on of hands will be able to hear your particular request for prayer and to pray personally and individually for you. You may wish to talk later either to me or members of the healing time. Please do. If it's short we can hear you after the service; if it's longer then ask to speak to us at another time. We'd be delighted to make time for you.

You may particularly like to have in mind that image of the bridge over troubled water, the Jesus who says "I'll be your bridge over deep water if you trust in me", and the image of oil poured upon troubled waters. Where are we churned up, disturbed, overwhelmed by the waves: here is the oil of calm, of healing, of grace, of the overwhelming love of God.