

Searching for Peter

Saint Peter plays such an important part in so many New Testament stories, it seems surprising that it is quite hard to find representations of him here in Edgbaston Old Church.



There is, of course, the stone carving at the base of the pulpit:



This is Saint Peter, depicted as the holder of the keys of paradise, the founding father of the Christian church.

But are there any more portrayals of Peter here, perhaps alongside Jesus? There is one obvious place to start our search. It is possible that Peter is one of the disciples in the boat in the stained glass window our Lady Chapel that has at its base the words, 'It is I, be not afraid'.

Let's take a moment to consider this powerful scene in its biblical context. What has happened in the story immediately beforehand is 'the feeding of the five thousand'. In Matthew's gospel, following this miracle, Jesus tells the disciples to embark and cross 'to the other side'; then he dismisses the crowd and goes by himself into the hills to pray. (*Matthew 14:22-23*).



The account in Mark's gospel is almost identical (*Mark 6: 45-46*). However, in John's gospel, after the 'sign' of the loaves and fishes, Jesus realises that the crowd means to seize him and proclaim him king, hence he 'withdraws', and goes by himself up into the hills (*John 6:14-15*).

In all three gospels, the next part of the story occurs after night has fallen. The disciples are 'well out on the water' (*Mark 6: 47*), when the weather deteriorates and they have to labour with all their strength against a head wind.

There had been another occasion when the disciples were on the lake in a severe storm; the time when Jesus was with them, and he rebuked the wind and the waves into instant calm. (*Mark 4:39 ; Matthew 8:26 ; Luke 8:24*). But now the disciples think that they are on their own at the mercy of the elements, because Jesus has stayed on the shore.

However, Jesus has observed how hard the disciples are labouring against the wind, and has moved towards them, walking on the lake (*Mark 6: 48*). Possibly Jesus is trying to avoid drawing yet more attention to his miraculous powers, for Mark continues, 'he was going to pass [the disciples] by', perhaps implying that Jesus intended to calm the wind discreetly, from a distance. However, some of the disciples see Jesus walking on the lake and cry out, thinking that they are seeing a ghost (*Mark 6:49 ; Matthew 14:26*). It is at this point that Jesus calls out, 'It is I, be not afraid'.



In our Lady Chapel stained glass representation of this scene, seven disciples are depicted. Is one of them Peter? If so, which? Two of them are somewhat in the background, behind the figure of Jesus, who is standing with his arm outstretched.

Of the remaining five figures, another is also in the background:



Two figures in the centre foreground are straining at the oars...

...and one seems too young to be Peter, and appears so traumatised by the storm that he has retreated into himself.



This leaves one more figure. And considering the weather conditions, what he is portrayed as doing is astonishing. For this man is not only standing up in a boat that is being buffeted by strong wind, both his hands are extended, and from his body position, he appears to be in the act of moving forwards.



Locating this moment in Matthew's gospel (*Matthew 14:29*), we see that our search for Peter is over: *[Jesus] said: 'Come.' Peter got down out of the boat, and walked over the water towards Jesus.*