

*The fear that drives our fear*

The task of the preacher in handling our passage from Mark's Gospel this morning seems at first sight to be fairly straightforward. The message seems to be clear and obvious and it goes something like this.

The disciples are out on a lake in a boat and the reason they are there is that Jesus has said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side' - 'the other side' here being Gentile territory, non-Jewish territory, unfamiliar, strange territory. And I guess it can always be a bit scary when you cross over into somewhere unknown – think of all the different ways that happens to us in our lives. I wonder when you last 'went across to the other side', and what that entailed. And of course what is scary about that journey is that you never know what you may meet on the way or what you may meet when you get there. Well, in this case the disciples run into a storm on the way and a demoniac riddled with demons when they get there (but that's another story). And storms are very frightening, even for seasoned fishermen like some of Jesus' disciples who were used to the unpredictable moods of the Sea of Galilee. Indeed water can be frightening – think back to the Book of Genesis, 'in the beginning', when God creates by taming the deep, the wild, surging, threatening abyss which is the chaos out of which God created the universe. Then there is the story of Noah and the flood and we see there the immense destructive potential of water. And there are stories like the one about Jonah, who has a storm sent in judgement upon him.

So you could say that the storm represents the deepest elemental fears of the disciples, and they're all scared to death of drowning. But Jesus, with them in the boat, Jesus whose big idea it was to 'cross to the other side' in the first place, Jesus who got them into the boat and out into the lake – he doesn't seem to care much. In fact he's fast asleep. Just when the disciples are facing a watery grave, Jesus is asleep. And of course that is because Jesus has power over the storm. The wind and the waves are no threat to him, he is at peace on his pillow and in the arms of God. But Jesus is stirred by his disciples: 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' And you can sense all the anger and indignation that the disciples are feeling at this Jesus who seems so indifferent to their fate. Back in the Old Testament in the Book of Psalms there is one very angry, raw psalm, Psalm 44, in which the writer vents his

frustration at God and accuses God of being asleep. ‘Rouse yourself!’ says the psalmist. ‘Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!’ And that cry is now transferred to the sleeping Jesus, and I wonder if we ever finding ourselves addressing God like that, when our hurt and our anger spill over into indignation at God. I suggest that there is something very powerful about a prayer like that, a prayer from the gut, an angry and anguished prayer from the wounded heart.

Jesus’ reaction, however, is interesting. He wakes and we are told that ‘he rebuked the wind’ and said to the sea ‘be still!’ And it’s significant that this is the language of exorcism that Jesus is speaking. That phrase, ‘he rebuked the wind’ is the same phrase Jesus used earlier in chapter 1 of Mark’s Gospel when he cast out an unclean spirit from a man in the synagogue. And when he says to the storm, ‘Be still!’ the actual sense is ‘Be muzzled!’ In other words Jesus here is effectively subduing the storm god, casting out the storm demon. And then, we are told, peace comes. ‘Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm.’ Suddenly, the storm is stilled, the waves lap quietly against the side of the boat, the roar of the wind is silenced.

Well, you don’t need me to tell you the meaning of this story. It’s pretty clear. It’s all about the peace of the Gospel, isn’t it, the peace that Jesus brings to disordered, chaotic lives? In this world we face trouble. It can be a scary place and we never know what storms may assail us. And there are those crossings that we must make into strange terrain – like when we lose a loved one, or when we get a medical diagnosis, or when we realise that the years have slipped by and we are entering the territory of old age. And sometimes at times like these Jesus seems to be asleep. He doesn’t seem to be doing much to help. The message, however, is clear. Jesus is with you in the boat, and he has power to still the storm. So don’t be afraid. Have faith.

Now, no-one would doubt a word of all that. There’s only one problem. That is not where this passage takes us. These verses do not end with the disciples saying, ‘Phew! That was a close shave! Good old Jesus got out of a right mess there!’ No, this passage ends with the words – listen to them again - ‘And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’ Only that phrase, ‘they were filled with great awe’ is not at all a good translation. What it literally says is, ‘they feared with a great fear!’ In other words, Mark here is piling on the fear. If the disciples were frightened in the midst of the storm, they weren’t half as

frightened as they were when he stilled it. Now the fear really kicks in! The storm didn't scare them nearly as much as Jesus did!

Now we are getting to the heart of this story. You see, Mark's whole Gospel is written to confront us with the extraordinary, troubling fact of Jesus in whom we come up against the reality of God's own self. After all, who is it that has the power to exorcise the storm god? Who is it that has the authority to calm the wind and the waves? God does, and only God! Listen to Psalm 104:

'The waters stood above the mountains.  
at your rebuke, they flee;  
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.'

And what does it mean therefore that Jesus here is rebuking the waters, putting the storm god to flight? This is one who is to be feared.

It's interesting, isn't it, that when the disciples are in the boat they call Jesus 'teacher'. 'Teacher', they cry, 'do you not care that we are perishing?' And up to this point they had known Jesus as teacher and they didn't have any problem with that. They could relate to Jesus as a teacher. They had sat spellbound as they listened to his sublime and authoritative teaching. And the world wasn't short of teachers and never has been and it isn't today. And trawl the internet and you will find any number of teachers and teachings all aimed at you finding peace in this troubled world, and you maximising your potential, and you discovering the real you, and you setting free the child within you, and you being happy and successful and preferably wealthy. And the Christian Gospel all too easily becomes one more version of the same thing – teaching to master life. And Mark's Gospel is interesting because he doesn't give us that much of Jesus' teaching - he gives us a Jesus who scares the hell out of us - literally. Remember the ending of Mark's gospel. The other Gospels end with the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples, reassuring them, giving them peace, teaching them. How does Mark end? Describing the women who had found the tomb empty Mark's Gospel concludes, '... terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.' That's it. The gospel ends with terror and fear.

You see, there is this well-worn, clichéd narrative about Jesus that goes something like this. Jesus of Nazareth was a great teacher, a dispenser of sublime wisdom. The disciples had never heard anything like it. And after his death they remembered his sayings and then – and this is where it all went wrong – as the centuries passed they turned him into some sort of divine being,

some sort of god. And we need to get back to the simple Jesus the teacher. Well, that just won't wash. From the earliest days Jesus' followers were struggling to articulate how it was that in coming face to face with Jesus they seemed to be coming face to face with God! Jesus the teacher didn't still the storm. Jesus the teacher didn't exorcise the lake, casting out the storm god. It was Jesus the Lord of the deep! And that scared them - but it was also good news. It was massively good news. You see, it's quite likely that at the time when Mark was writing the Emperor Nero was devising ever more cruel and depraved means of dispatching Christians to their deaths. And the message of the Gospel was not just that Jesus' presence could bring peace in the turbulence of persecution. The message was that if Nero was scary, then there was one who would set even Nero's knees knocking, one who even Nero would fear with a great fear. That's the good news the early Christians needed. It's the kind of fear that drives out fear.

Put it this way. There are different kinds of fear. There is fear that simply paralyses. It terrorizes and squeezes the life out of us. But there is also a fear that evokes faith. It's the fear of someone who is far beyond our comprehension, someone who is mysterious and cannot be reduced to our familiar categories, but someone who is utterly good and loving and trustworthy. That is the fear that brings us to our knees, that summons our allegiance, that demands my soul, my life, my all. That's the fear that overcame Job in our reading earlier, after he'd poured out all his complaints and all his anguish before God. And it's the fear that gripped the disciples that day on the lake. It was the fear that provoked faith and that compelled them to follow their Lord. It's the fear that drives out fear.

It seems that recently I have been quoting C S Lewis rather a lot but can't resist it one more time. In his book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* there's a lovely conversation between Mr and Mrs Beaver and two of the children in the story, Lucy and Susan. They are talking about Aslan, the Christ figure in the story and Lucy has just been told he is a lion.

'Ooh!' said Susan... Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.'

'That you will, dearie, and make no mistake,' said Mrs Beaver; 'i there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking they're either braver than most or else just silly.'

'Then he isn't safe?' said Lucy.

4  
'Safe?' said Mrs Beaver... 'who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'

On that day on the lake the disciples did not discover a safe Christ, far from it  
No storm-muzzling Christ can possibly be safe. But he's good. He's the King  
He loves you. So get into the boat and start rowing. Amen.

O great and gracious God:  
Life-giver, storm-stiller,  
You are Lord of power and might  
who commands the chaos, and subdues the wind,  
who silences the roaring of the waves and calms the sea.  
And such power is too much for us little people.  
Before your great majesty we are undone and overcome,  
overwhelmed by such majesty.  
And so you come to us in Jesus of Nazareth,  
meeting us face to face,  
the eternal Word speaking to us in our own language.

So we dare to meet you here.  
We come to offer you worship  
and we come with lives that are sometimes in disarray,

buffeted and blown by the storms of life  
and sullied by our wrongdoings.

O God, meet us here in power;  
meet us here in grace;  
meet us here in forgiveness as we confess to you  
and acknowledge our sins...

And loving God,  
blow the wind of your Spirit through our hearts.  
Stir us up to lives of obedience and trust and faithfulness.  
We pray in Jesus' name and in his words we pray, saying....

Holy God,  
We think this morning of a storm on a lake  
in all its fearful destruction,  
and we are reminded of our vulnerability before nature  
and its fury.  
We pray today for the people of Nepal as they continue  
to rebuild their shattered lives after the recent earthquakes there.  
And we pray for those who suffer disproportionately  
from the effects of global warming,  
often the world's poorest communities.  
O God, teach us to live at peace with nature;  
teach us to live in sustainable ways;  
teach us to halt the destruction of species and to

reverse the devastation we have wreaked  
upon our environment...

O God as we think this morning of a storm of a lake  
our minds turn to images of refugees packed onto  
overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels,  
people seeking to escape impossible lives,  
people seeking to escape murderous and tyrannical regimes,  
peoples seeking to cross over to something better.

O God help the world to respond to this growing problem.  
Help the world to devise a co-ordinated response  
that will save lives and bring hope to the hopeless...

And peaceable God,

As we have been confronted this week with news  
of multiple murder in a church,

we pray for the people of

Emanuel American American Episcopal Church,

and especially the bereaved and the wounded,

and for the perpetrator of this wicked act.

O God help us all to fight the twin evils of violence and racism  
that are such a scourge to our world...

O God, remember those this morning in special need –

The sad, the anxious and the troubled,

Those struggling against the storms of life.

Storm-stilling Lord, grant to them your peace,

We pray on the name of Jesus our Lord and Saviour. Amen.