

Navigating deep waters

Psalm 107:1-3, 22-32; Mark 4:35-41

'When chaos threatens our lives and we are rendered helpless in its grip, fear and anxiety seize us. As people of faith (and even as people of doubt) we cry out to the Jesus Who promises to accompany us. Our cry sometimes reveals more about our fear than our faith. "Do You not care?" we shout. Jesus responds by asking us to choose faith over fear.ⁱ

In every generation the image of Jesus and the disciples with Jesus navigating the deep waters of the Sea of Galilee in the midst of a storm speaks powerfully. For all of us times of calm and times of storm is what we call 'life'. We can look back on passed storms; we may be living through a storm at this moment; or we may anticipate storms ahead in the future. For all our C21st sophistication, our human vulnerability towards storms remains. Storms caused by nature as wind and wave, rain and snow batter our lives and we realise how little we are in control. Or we think of the storms caused by unemployment or war; bereavement or serious health issues; financial and political turbulence. The little boat which carries our lives will not sail through the seas of life on endlessly calm and sun-filled days. I suspect that suits our Presbyterian temperament, as even on the days of blue skies and bright, warm sunshine, we look suspiciously to the heavens and mutter to ourselves, "Aye, we'll pay for it"!

Set in the hills of northern Israel, the Sea of Galilee is nearly 700 feet below sea level. It is nearly eight miles wide at its widest point, and more than 12 miles long from north to south. In places, the sea plunges to depths of 200 feet. Much of the sea's beauty comes from being nestled among the hills; green in the spring, brown during the dry season, which contrast with the deep blue of the water.

The sea's location makes it subject to sudden and violent storms as the wind comes over the eastern mountains of the Golan Heights and drops suddenly onto the sea. Storms are likely when an east wind blows cool air over the warm air that covers the sea. The cold air drops as the warm air rises. This sudden change can produce surprisingly furious storms in a short time, as it did in Jesus' day. Mark tells us the story simply and realistically. The disciples put out to sea with Jesus. A sudden squall blows up, Jesus is wakened by His terrified friends, He stands up in the boat, tells the wind to, 'Be quiet!' and the waves, 'Be still!' They do so. But underneath this surface story lies a whole host of symbolic meanings.

It's not an easy story for C21st to take at face value. The 'nature miracles' of Jesus are sometimes dismissed as being unworthy of belief. If they are looked at as special tricks or super wonderworks, perhaps they are unbelievable.ⁱⁱ

But behind and beyond a simplistic and literalistic telling of this story lies something much more imaginative and satisfying and closer, I believe, to what this story means. Jesus and the disciples are moving on. It is the close of the day but there is no time for rest yet. The road of discipleship gives little time for rest while the kingdom of God is near and telling and living out its Good News remains urgent. A journey over the sea looms, Jesus and His followers are going out and beyond from the safety of dry land onto the waters, which people in ancient times feared precisely because they were uncontrollable and constantly moving. Jesus and His followers were going, metaphorically, outside the old law, outside the familiar, acceptable, respectable limits of Jewish community, into non- Jewish territory. It is no wonder this metaphorical storm brewed in the minds of His disciples. Here on the sea, that ancient symbol of God's ongoing struggle with the forces of chaos and evil, control of the sea was a sign of divine power. The human ability to stay

calm in the face of the storm was seen as a sign of true faith. Here we see Jesus true to His calling as the One Who brings the divine presence into every storm in life.ⁱⁱⁱ

I wonder how many of the disciples, at least four of them fishermen, recalled the words of Psalm 107. *"Some went down to the sea in ships...(that) raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men, and were at their wits end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them from their distress; He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and He brought them to their desired haven."* The Book of Psalms, Jesus' and the disciples' hymnbook, spoke of the need to endure storms in life, real and metaphorical. It spoke also of human fear in the face of things beyond our control. It spoke of the cry of doubt, 'Wake up God! Do You really care? Do something, or help us do something, to get things under control again.' And God, in Jesus, asleep on His cushion in the stern of the boat, wakes up, eventually, and acts, and calm is restored.

This is a story, these woven strands from the Psalms and the Gospel, saying to us that the same Jesus Who calls us out on to the stormy waters of the sea of faith, in the midst of the storm will bring us calm and peace, if we but see, hear and attend to Him. So often in His teaching Jesus invites people to, 'Listen'. In the stilling of the storm, even the winds and the waves 'listen, and 'obey' Him. If the natural world responds in this way, will the human world inhabited by the disciples, and people like us today, do the same. When Jesus speaks, in the storms of life and in the calm of life, do we listen, do we obey? Are our lives truly formed by an open, trusting, imaginative faith grounded in Jesus alone? Or do we think we can always do our own thing, and

then panic when things don't work out, and we find ourselves out of our depth, or shipwrecked on the steep shores of doubt?

I love the way the Bible reaches out from millennia ago and touches something very real in our lived experience. We are being asked, 'What faith have you? Is it also pretty small, like the first disciples?' I don't see that as a put-down. There is a real difference between a little faith and no faith at all. However little and meagre our faith seems, there is no call to despair. Remember the parable of the mustard seed: from the tiniest amount of belief, faith can and will grow. 'Lord, increase my faith. Increase our faith.'

Recognising this centuries before Jesus, the Psalmist calls believers to thank God, and to tell people about His wonderful works, and praise Him in their worship.

These are stories for our day. Look at our world, and our country. At our wits' end we cry out of need, desperate need for the rubble reality that is Gaza and Ukraine; for the food-bank dependent thousands in our country, one of the richest in the world; for those struggling to find a home because there have never been enough affordable homes built in our country since the end of World War Two; for the undiagnosed and suffering waiting for treatment and medical appointments; when some locum doctors cannot find enough work in England because, it is reported by the British Medical Association, that funding for GP practices in England rose by just 1.9% above inflation and that some practices have to cut back on posts and funding for temporary staff. There are storms aplenty today and many cry with a raw expression of pending and current distress.

We do what we can, as we must. But it is God Who hears and responds and has the power to save. God, when we are determined to trust and believe, will work alongside us to rescue us all. I believe

all of us can point to times in our lives when, beyond explanation and expectation, help came.

Could it be, might it be, was it – God?

The C19th novelist Emily Brontë wrote in a rectory set in the bleak moors of Yorkshire. She lived a grim tragedy with her half-demented father and alcoholic brother. Nevertheless, she was able to write these poetic words: *No coward soul is mine, no trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere. I see Heaven's glory shine, and faith shines equal, arming me from fear.*

We will all navigate deep waters; we were not destined for the shallows. Storms will come, and we will know fear. But faith gives us Jesus, beside us, and He will say in the face of every storm, when we cannot find the words, "Peace, be still!"

That remains our choice today: Fear, or faith. Choose faith.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ M Jan Holton, *Feasting on the Gospels, Mark*, p140

ⁱⁱ Vincent Donovan, *The Church in the Midst of Creation*, p122

ⁱⁱⁱ Leith Fisher, *Will You Follow Me?* p68