**23rd June 2024
1 Samuel 17.32-49
Mark 4.35-41**

# Will your anchor hold?

Minister: Lord God – our prayer is that the written word
 will point us to Christ, the Living Word.
 **All: So, in his name we pray
 and for his voice we listen. Amen.**

I can just about remember being a young minister, in a busy town centre church and having responsibility for the youth group. It was the late 1980’s and we had a bubbly set of young people and one Spring we decided to take them over to Germany for the weekend for a visit to our twinned church in Cologne.

The week before one of the teenagers had the idea that the journey would be very risky and for some reason, known only to himself, he spread this ‘good’ news to the whole group. Well, although most just dismissed his bad vibes and didn’t believe the ferry would sink, there were a few, isn’t there always, who did get themselves a bit worked up. The leaders were characteristically brilliant at calming nerves. So, as we embarked at Dover and suddenly the mist came down and the ferry started the short Channel crossing sounding its foghorn, I confess I was a bit angry with the Almighty and wondered, just for a millisecond, if our young prophet of doom had been right all along! Well, I’m pleased to say we all arrived at the French port in one piece ready for our onward coach journey to Cologne and a great weekend with members of the Church of Peace in that city.

So, what should we make of Mark’s account of the storm on Galilee? It’s become something of a classic with that memorable image of Jesus, with waves crashing and wind blowing, commanding all to *be still.*

The metaphor of God stilling the storm is biblically so important because for generations, in Jewish thought, the sea was imagined, and experienced, to be one of the most frightening places ever to be. We understand that if we stop to appreciate that probably most people couldn’t swim, weather forecasting was limited and the RNLI wasn’t yet invented.

For the Jews, and maybe even for us, the thought of a vast sea spooked them. Frequently in the Old Testament we read of the swirling waters or the fate of people going down to the depths of the oceans. Many of Mark’s readership would, therefore, have been deeply fearful of being in a boat during a storm.

So, just as Jesus brings about equilibrium to troubled people, through exorcisms, in the various stories that surround this one in Mark, so now on Galilee he is depicted as replacing chaos with order, so much so that the stunned disciples exclaim: *Look how even the wind and waves obey him.*There will be those of you in church this morning who know far more about the Sea of Galilee than I, because you have been there. You might even have sailed there.

Geographers tell us it was prone to storms and that the weather could unexpectedly turn bad in a flash. Apparently, the wind comes off the Mediterranean and funnels down the mountains to the west of Galilee, through an area known as Pigeon Pass, and then whips up the waters of the lake. And, so it’s said, storms can equally die down as quickly as they start.

Yet, in the boat that day, and presumably on the one that Mark says was following, there would have been disciples whose first careers were fishermen. They had surely encountered such storms before because they were commonplace. Why then, this panic and the alarmed call to Jesus that he does something or else they would all die?

Mark, probably because it fits the intention of this story, goes to great lengths to limit the ability of these seasoned sailors to cope with today’s storm. He paints this as being an exceptional, maybe once in a lifetime storm, so much so that even those who had coped with many others felt this one was just beyond them.

It's a picture of depending on God and calling for divine help because relying just on experience and one’s own ability seems inadequate. In this story the disciples look to Jesus. In our stories, Mark is surely encouraging us to look to God.

And, because the commentators tell us that of all the gospels Mark’s has the least to say about the Resurrection, maybe a story like today’s was his way of presenting Jesus as the one who can face death with life, who can bring hope even where there is despair. So, to those who might have thought this journey was to be their last, Jesus offers them life, hope and a new day. It has something of a Resurrection feel to it.

Like many gospel stories this one playfully invites us in. The point is not to think too literally about supernatural powers but to ponder, in the words of that children’s song, how we might *smile* with Christ in the vessel? Because being buffeted by the waves of life is a common experience that we all share. So, what does faith look like in the eye of a storm as we face an illness, bereavement, invasion, money worries or a breakup? The waves may, at times, crash down upon us and yet sometimes, just like those fishermen disciples, at the very moment when it feels that our natural resilience and resources are running out, we sense strength from above, a touch of God, maybe ministered to us through another person, strength and hope that brings us peace, stills the storm and enables us to complete the journey.

All the stories of the gospels appear as they do to help illustrate the point each evangelist is trying to make.

Maybe Mark takes his que from the well-known story of Jonah found in the Jewish scriptures. Often events in the gospels look remarkably like Old Testament stories reworked by the likes of Matthew, Mark and Luke, to show God not just present in the life of Jonah, or Moses say, but present too in the ministry of Jesus. The similarity to the Jonah story is the storm at sea and the threat of total disaster. The difference is that the person in the boat wasn’t the problem but the solution. It might just be an Old Testament story neatly refashioned in favour of Jesus. A story in which the crew who sailed with him learn much about him.

So, Mark tells us, they set off from one shore to the other, a journey at most of just over 8miles. Jesus occupies the seat of an honoured guest at the stern of the boat, probably a section a touch upmarket from the rest of the vessel, indeed even the gospel includes the intriguing detail that he had been given a pillow or cushion and was now asleep.

And during this time to storm comes up, Jesus is awoken, calms the wind and the waves and they continue onwards to landfall.

One of the most helpful ways I find to make sense of this story is to think of the dark, deep waters – so prone to squalls and gales – as troubled places. These are the *no go* areas of life; the places, since childhood, we have been urged to stay away from because they are dangerous. Maybe that’s because it’s thought that in such desolate and abandoned places or people we’ll never find God. He’s in a church but not a pub or club. He's at the parish fete but not stock market. He’s part of the narrative of the West but absent from the Communist constructs of China’s East. Or, as Mark might want to say, some of you believe God is present on fine, sunny days on dry ground, yet absent when we’re at sea and the wind is getting stronger and the waves bigger. But, here’s the thing, says Mark, no place is too desolate for God, no situation demands his absence. God does not abandon us, just as Jesus didn’t his fishermen disciples.

I suppose we all have seminal moments in our pilgrimage when the picture we have of God is deepened, perhaps made more complex, yet ironically although God is now a more complicated figure for us, God can also become a more helpful one. Such a moment came for me as I watched a T.V. documentary of the then Director of Christian Aid, Charles Elliot climb up a mountain of rubbish in a South American Favella, alongside scavenging children. It was, in truth, a truly depressing and appalling sight and he was asked *Where is God in all this?* I suspect the reporter felt the Director of Christian Aid would be stumped by that one. A rubbish dump on the edge of town where children scavenge in the dirt. Perhaps nothing could better serve as an icon to an absentee God than this. Yet Charles Elliot’s answer, although deeply disturbing in a way, has stayed with me ever since when he answered *God is the mess. On this favella dustheap. God is here.*

And around that we might weave a whole theology about the God who is present with us in the sufferings of life. The God of the cross. The God who serves with nail prints in his hands.

God can be with us in the nighttime of our fears, whether that’s in the terror of a storm upon the lake or the sweaty stench of a shanty town rubbish heap that draws foraging children. No place is so abandoned, no situation so desperate, no context so desolate as to exclude God. Many, and that may well include us at times, will erroneously believe God must be locked up in a church, synagogue or mosque. Yet, during this season of Pentecost, our bible readings tell another story. Through the Spirit God’s presence is everywhere, even in the eye of a storm.

Now, it’s clear from today’s gospel that such a picture of God isn’t one that’s easy to grasp, even when you experience it close up. So, Mark says, having gone through this Galilean tempest and survived, even having called out for Jesus’ help and then experienced it, his fellow passengers end the story still misreading him and asking that most intriguing question, *Who can this be?*

We might have thought that by now, after spending so much time alongside Jesus, that the disciples were now *insiders,* not the *outsiders,* like the religious professionals and politicians in the pay of Rome, that Jesus is so often frustrated by. Yet, again and again, it appears that neither the miracles nor the teaching of Jesus lifted the ambiguity of who he was. And, let’s face it, that’s a journey that most of us are still on. Our pilgrimage is often one of stumbling steps and even, at times, backward ones. Yet, again and again, God beckons us forward and urges us not to give up asking the questions and walking the path.

As I read today’s gospel I sense that God assures us of his presence as we journey through life. He promises to be there in the storm – just as Charles Elliot believed he was present on the rubbish dump. The God who is always ever present. Alongside and within us. The one who shows us the way.

And this is the God who says no place is so abandoned or so desolate that is becomes off limits for my love and transforming presence.

Well, I must close.

I remember when we came, either to preach with a squint or preach with a view, AFC’s then organist, Eric, played the melody of the hymn we are just about to sing, he played it during the offering – you remember those days! It was the hymn *Will your anchor hold,* because he’d read on the ministerial profile that had been sent to the church that our two children were at that time paid up members of the Boys’ Brigade, and this hymn is sometimes thought of as the BB hymn. He did it, rather wonderfully, to make us feel at home!

*Will your anchor hold* was written by a Methodist Sunday School teacher in 1882. Pracilla Owens spent 50 years teaching children in Baltimore, Maryland and often wrote hymns like this one for Children’s Services at her local church. Moody and Sankey, the Billy Graham of their day, used this hymn at their evangelistic rallies.

Of course, this hymn is of its type, yet although it’s written for children it is far from childish. Along with today’s gospel it asks us to truly believe that God is with us, even in the storms of life. And because no where is abandoned to God, it calls to those who this week will struggle with peace talks in Israel, who will sit beside someone they love in a hospice or who will go to counselling to do all they can to save their marriage, to believe that even at the hardest of life’s moments when the storm in raging, God’s love, peace, light and strength can, and does, break through.

For as Miss Owens wrote almost 150 years ago for her Sunday School class: *We have an anchor that keeps the soul, steadfast and sure while the billows roll.*

May it be so in the name of the God who shares every journey across the lake with us. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 21st June 2024*