

Rector's Sermon

9th August 2020 Matthew 14:22-33

It is not the first time we find Jesus' disciples terrified on the Sea of Galilee. The disciples are no strangers to this lake. Actually, they're out on it all the time. Even before Jesus called them to fish for people, they fished here for fish, no doubt risking life and limb for a good catch.

A quick look back at chapter eight reminds us of one traumatic experience the disciples had not so long ago. We may recall the story: A windstorm arises, so strong that the boat is swamped, and it begins to sink. Scared to death, the disciples yell to Jesus, who is fast asleep in the back, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" Jesus from within the boat responds calmly, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he gets up, rebukes the wind, calms the sea, and the disciples are amazed.

Jesus, as always, hits the nail on the head. All too often we respond out of fear - sometimes storms pop up in our lives and catch us unawares. That's what storms do. It's only natural for a dog to hide under the bed when he hears thunder; for a child to cling to her mother when she sees lightning; for the driver to pull over when he can no longer see the road.

These are the routine unsurprising but undeniable fears that are a regular part of life. Events such as the breakdown of relationships, redundancy, stress at work - events that we can engage with and can, with the right help and support, overcome over time. We are in the boat; we have some security. Though the storm is buffeting the boat around and the waves may at times seem overwhelming and we may feel that the boat we are on is in danger of sinking, but Jesus is there with us in the boat. We can see him, and he is deeply reassuring. Just look at Jesus - we do not find him living in fear. No, he is calm, so calm in fact that while the disciples around him are panicking, he is actually fast asleep. He has total confidence in the providence of God. Whereas the disciples are striving on their own to solve the problems caused by the storm, Jesus calmly rebukes them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?".

In today's Gospel, however, it's not the weather that frightens the disciples. By now, they can handle being tossed about by strong winds and waves. Been there, done that. They have learnt to trust God in and through the normal fears of life. No, today is quite different. They are frightened by something else, something far more terrifying. They are being confronted with the terrible fear of that which is outside the boat, outside their realm of experience.

These are the fears that absolutely turn our lives upside down, that profoundly change our lives; the fears that we cannot prepare for and catch us utterly off guard. These are the fears of a pandemic, the fears of a terminal diagnosis, the fears of the sudden loss of a loved one before their time, the fears of a catastrophic injury. The fears of the storm and the raging seas, but this time without a boat to help navigate them. These are the fears that so often turn us away from God, away from our very source of hope.

Even when Jesus shows that he can counter these fears by walking on the very storm that seeks to overwhelm, Peter loses faith and hope and starts to drown, totally overcome by the ferocity of the storm and the height of the waves. And yet he is saved at the very limits of his faith – ‘Lord, save me!’ he cries. And Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and catches him. But he also asks Peter this sobering question: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

As I stated last week, when I preached on the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Jesus’s miracles should primarily be viewed as parables for us. And today’s Gospel is no exception.

The parabolic significance of today’s Gospel reading has been brought home to me since I was diagnosed with cancer of my spine and neck and was paralysed from the chest down twenty-four years ago. I had up until that point experienced many storms from within the boat. The cancer was a product of a congenital bone condition that I have, and I had many operations as a child – none of them life threatening - all of them inconvenient, but very much experiences from within the boat. But the cancer was another matter. Here I was definitely outside the boat and initially the waves were too high, with my life very much in the balance. My faith could not withstand what was happening and I struggled to see where or how God could be present in such an experience. Even when my life was not in immediate danger these questions did not go away as I still had to face the potential that my career as a musician was over and that I was going to spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair.

My journey back into the Christian faith has involved crying out in my vulnerability and pain, ‘Lord, save me’, when all sense of hope had gone. And looking back over the subsequent twenty-four years I have been blessed to see the myriad ways in which Jesus has taken my hand and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid’.

Jesus took my hand through the gifts and skills of the surgeons, the physio and occupational therapists, pain specialists, psychotherapists, the love and support of family, friends, colleagues, total strangers and of course through the unfailing and devoted love of Bernie, my wife.

As I shared in my sermon way back on Easter Day, God is a relational God and God is always longing for relationship and seeking us out in love. His arm is always eagerly outstretched, desperately calling on us to take it. But we need to play our part, we need to be willing to take God’s eager outstretched hand. We are not called to be passive agents in our faith, we are called to be active participants and to take responsibility for our actions. That is why we have to be willing to respond to God’s call, to grasp God’s eager outstretched hand. Jesus is calling to each one of us, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid’. We have to be like Peter; be willing to call out for and respond to Jesus’ outstretched hand.

Responding positively to Jesus' open and loving invitation was the greatest decision I could make. It has not changed the reality of the cancer and the impact it has had on my life – I did not expect it to do so - but it has profoundly changed the way I have responded to it. For one thing, I would not be here in St Margaret's preaching this sermon, for I have little doubt that I would not have put myself forward for ordination if I had not first had cancer 24 years ago.

We are living through a period of time of pandemic when we feel like we are all at sea and are desperately seeking the security of a boat, one that can hold us and help us to navigate the billowing wind and waves. The future looks bleak and uncertain. Our leaders are having to navigate without the knowledge of previous experience and so are struggling to articulate our shared course. And as we feel we are drowning in the stormy waters and our hold on hope is slipping away, there is Jesus walking on the very waters of the storm, calling out, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid'. And we find it hard to believe. 'It is a ghost' we cry.

Our Gospel reading today and the previous storm narrative in chapter eight teach us two vital truths that could be utterly transformational if only we embraced them both; that God is utterly present with us in all the storms of life inside the boat and that God is utterly present with us in all the storms of life outside the boat, walking on the very waters of the most ferocious storms of life.

So, my question for us all today is this. Are we ready to be like Peter and offer to God our fears and vulnerability, calling out 'Lord, save me!', reach out and grasp his eager outstretched hand and embrace his offer of navigating the storms of life aboard his boat, and responding by joining the disciples saying 'Truly you are the Son of God'? Amen.