



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Third Sunday after Trinity

Proper 7 Year B

2 Corinthians 6. 1-13

Mark 4. 35-41

I have to say I don't feel comfortable around the sea. Maybe it's because we live just as far from it as it's possible to get here in Wigginton. More likely it's my personal preference, I love the country. I have always disliked the power of the sea. My only experience on it is a cross channel ferry! Mind you for four years, when I was at university in Swansea I lived by it. All very nice on a warm sunny day – horrible when the grey skies are lowering and the waves crashing about. I used to sit by the window of my hall of residence and watch the small boats and the huge ships out in the bay. I honestly can't imagine being a sailor or fisherman and I have great admiration for them.

*'Who stilleth the raging of the sea
and the noise of his waves, and the madness of the people.'*

Whenever I read this gospel passage these words always come back to me – and in this form. The reason is that I joined the choir at St. Leonards when I was about 21 and was a member for around 40 years. In the early days we sang evensong every Sunday evening as had been done for centuries past. Of course we sang the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimitis and of course the psalm set for the day in the King James Version. After I was ordained I led it myself on occasion. The quotation is of course from psalm 65, familiar to us as the 'harvest psalm' because it is often used at harvest festivals. The account of Jesus stilling the storm appears in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew 8.23-27 and Luke 8. 22-25. Also we have another story of a storm on the lake, the story of Jesus coming to the disciples by walking on the water later. Once again there is also a high wind and the disciples are afraid for their safety.

At this point it is worth pausing to explain why the Sea of Galilee could be such a dangerous place and to remember that as very experienced fishermen some of the disciples would be excellent sailors and not easily cowed. They knew what they were doing in a boat. The Sea of Galilee is prone to sudden violent storms because it is more than six hundred feet below sea level, surrounded by hills and mountains, the rivers cut deep ravines and pour down into the lake. The winds rush down

these valleys on to the water. The result is the phenomenon of the sudden storm. There is no doubt these sudden storms are life threatening to this day.

We know what Jesus had been doing all day; we looked at it last week. He had been teaching offshore so that people could see and hear him, the crowds were that huge. Also he needs rest. We are told it was 'when evening had come.' Jesus needs peace. We are given specific details by Mark; there is nothing nebulous about this story. Jesus gives the disciples clear instructions, 'Let us go across to the other side' also we are told 'other boats were with him.' Mark wants to set the scene he wants to be quite specific.

So they set sail and one of those ferocious storms hits them out of nowhere. It must have been awful because of the disciple's reaction, they are terrified. The waves are so huge they are in danger of being swamped yet still Jesus sleeps on in the 'stern' of the boat. Their cry of 'don't you care we are perishing' is born out of terror. His reply is to address the wind and waves and say, 'Peace be still' and all of a sudden there is dead calm.

This is a supernatural event and this is cosmic. Jesus' next words are 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'

There is a huge amount packed into this episode. Firstly look at Jesus' words here. Think of that other storm when Jesus comes to the disciples walking on the water, Matthew 14. 22. The disciples are afraid, it is Peter who tries to go to Jesus across the water. At first all is well but he looks at the huge waves, fear takes over and he starts to sink. It is the strong hand of Jesus clasped around his that saves him. It is of course Jesus' hand clasped around ours that gives us strength to face the troubles of life. Jesus' words to Peter then echo our passage, verse 31 'You of little faith why did you doubt?'

It is interesting that in our passage Jesus adds the word 'still.' 'Have you still no faith?' After all they have seen and witnessed Jesus' power over sickness and evil yet they still lack faith. Maybe it is because it is about self-preservation here. It is easy to say you believe until your life depends upon it. Maybe Mark is addressing this to the early church too because they did indeed live under the threat of persecution and death. Their faith would be tested in life or death situations.

Faith is what it is all about. Trust in Jesus as Messiah, as Saviour and God. There are no halfway houses for Jesus. We saw that a couple of weeks ago when he said, 'Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Here is Jesus with his closest friends; the little band that he will entrust with spreading the good news of God. Here are the very ones who should have absolute faith, but still they doubt. And yet, and yet – it is to Jesus they turn when their lives are in danger. They must believe he can help. Do they just think he should get up and help with the rigging? Maybe, Jesus' words make it seem likely. What actually happens next shocks and amazes them.

We remember that they have seen him cure people; they have seen his power over 'unclean spirits' –the next passage will be the healing of the demoniac. Jesus has power over evil. Surely we ask, shouldn't they have understood Jesus' power over cosmic forces? For that is what we see here, it is what Mark means his readers to see. This is a story which like so many others works on several levels. On a literal level the Sea of Galilee is a place of danger which in this violent storm threatens their lives. On another level the sea to the Jews was a place of evil, of threat, of mystery that contained huge evil creatures, think of Jonah and the whale. Many of the psalms, including the one I quoted, make this belief obvious. Jesus has power to conquer evil. He has power over the forces of darkness and he has power over creation.

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That means one thing, Jesus is God. Only the divine being can do this. He was there at the beginning and 'all things came into being through him.' He is the ruler of the universe because as part of the Godhead it is his. It is not just the power over the physical universe, 'who is this that even the wind and sea obey him,' there is only one answer to that; it is about cosmic power now.

Jesus is the Saviour of humanity; at Calvary he will vanquish the power of sin and evil forever by love. At his resurrection, death 'will have no more dominion.' At his coming the seeds of God's new creation are sown and at his second coming when he comes to judge the peoples the new creation will be brought to fruition. Then God's Kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. All this is contained in this story.

On another level it talks to us of God's peace. Think of the resurrection appearance in the upper room. 'Peace be with you, do not be afraid.' Think of his words to the disciples at his last meal with them John 14.

'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.'

Think of the hymn 'Still the storms of strife and passion, bid its cruel discords cease.'

Where Jesus is there is peace, only when people turn their back on him can the evils of this world take hold.

Jesus' words 'Do not be afraid for I am with you,' are true for us as much as they were for the disciples and all Jesus' followers through the generations past and to come. This is the wonder of our faith, Jesus is always here. We talk to him in prayer, we rest in his presence. Whatever we have to face we do not face it alone, the 'creator of the stars and sea' is with us. Jesus calls on us to have faith in him and in his power. He will never let us down. We have a commission too just as the disciples did. 'Think of the end of the parable of 'the Good Samaritan', 'Go and do thou likewise.' Live as I have taught you.

Our epistle reading follows on well from this gospel story. Paul has experienced the storms of life in abundance and we will see these referred to later in the reading. His Lord has supported and strengthened him throughout. It is worth just looking back at the end of chapter 5.

²⁰'So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.'

Paul is making his own calling clear. He has been called to live out the Christ life. He has been called to live and die if necessary for and like his Lord. He is an ambassador for his king, Jesus. Like all ambassadors he brings the words, the message of his Lord. The Corinthians must realise this and understand the wonder of the message he brings. Understand the gifts God freely bestows on all who truly turn to him. Paul is writing of the glory of Jesus Christ, the face of God humans have seen, to the church he founded in Corinth. The church he founded had to an extent lost its way to the arrogance and pride of people. He did not have an easy time with them. He is trying to straighten them out, to make them see the truth and to live out that truth in their lives and the life of the church.

I suppose if I was to put what Paul says next into a couple of words they would be, *carpe diem*, seize the day.

^{6.1}'As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!'

It goes for us as well as the Corinthians – you have accepted the word of Jesus. Now live it out in your lives. The new creation is here, be a part of his new creation. To do that you must put the old past ways behind you and live the new life of Christ now. There is no time to waste; accept what Jesus has done for you and won for you! Paul's ministry has been called into question by the Corinthians but his letter sets that straight.

³'We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way:'

Indeed he has and his past life of mission has entailed a great deal of suffering as we have seen as we have studied his writings. The catalogue of his sufferings is detailed by Paul not to impress the Corinthians – instead he shows what it means to follow Christ in an antagonistic society. He is not hiding anything from them. Life is not a bed of roses; Jesus' words 'Anyone who wishes to be my follower must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.' are the literal truth -that is what it has meant for Paul, that is what life could mean for anyone who accepts the way of Christ. But Paul sees his sufferings as nothing – he is simply following in his master's footsteps, it is a privilege to share in Christ's suffering and Paul will gain his master's promised salvation, as will all who truly turn to him and live in his way.

Paul himself is using the speechmaker's technique of antithesis, the putting together of opposites. We get the persecution inflicted by sin and hate juxtaposed to the qualities of the Spirit, the qualities of love. Do we when treated badly respond in the way Paul does, in the way Christ does?

⁶'by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;'

This is what we are called to do, never to condone the sin but forgive the sinner. The fruits of the Spirit are the gift of God and our armour against evil. Paul has suffered from depression but never despair. To despair is to turn your back on God. With Christ at his side he can face anything, as can we. The world, the old order may see him as despised but he knows his worth and he knows and shares the way and value of God. Love is at the centre of everything. He is called to love as God loves.

⁸ 'in honour and dishonour, ⁹ in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.'

Yes the world may see him as nothing, inflict punishment, ignore and disregard him and so on but whatever his suffering he will never be defeated, never cowed. Even in the depth of suffering he knows his worth and the way he must follow. He is living the Christ life. The gift of God, Salvation and eternal life with him are freely given and Paul has embraced them. Now he offers this to the Corinthians.

Paul has spoken from his heart, his vulnerability. He has spoken the truth and as St John says, 'The truth will set you free.' What Paul has said in honesty and openness to the Corinthians must vindicate him, must show them his true worth as an ambassador of Christ.

¹¹'We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. ¹²There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. ¹³In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.'

Paul still pours out affection on the Corinthians; the rebuke is to their lack of love. They are acting as recalcitrant children but he is calling them back to the right way. He has appealed to them from the depth of his being. He has spoken the truth to them. Now it is time for them to open their hearts to Christ; time to seize the day, to seize the message and the offered salvation of Jesus. The precious message that Christ's ambassador, Paul brings to them.

In all the joys and storms of life we know that Jesus walks alongside us. We remember his promise, 'I am with you always even until the end of time.' Our God is the God of love who cares for us more deeply than we can know.

'Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water. Put your hand in the hand of the man who calmed the sea... Put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee.' Gene MacLellan.

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