

Where Is Your Faith?

The calming of the storm

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 24 February 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-end; Luke 8:22-25

"Where is your faith?"

That's the question embedded at the heart of this passage: the question Jesus puts to his disciples on the boat after the storm has been calmed. I don't know about you but I sometimes come across folk who seem to think that faith is an 'either-or' thing: either you've got it or you haven't; some talk as if they've got no real control over it; sometimes people say things like "I wish I had your faith", as if it's something you're born with and is completely unchangeable. But I think this passage suggests there are different degrees of faith.

"Where is your faith?" asks Jesus, to which one possible answer is, "Well we showed faith when we first got into the boat with you." When Jesus says, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake," he is inviting them to come with him into uncharted territory. The other side of the lake was Gentile land; it was unclean; foreign; the realm of pagans, false gods and unclean spirits. So to go with Jesus to the other side of the lake was to leave behind what was familiar, what was known and acceptable and safe. It was to leave home and venture out across the boundaries: and that required the disciples to show real faith; to trust that Jesus knew what he was doing; to show openness to doing something new; something bold; something a bit risky. Which makes me wonder whether faith only becomes an issue if we are already outside our comfort zone. As long as we are still in control, as long as we're keeping within our limits, carefully managing our resources, living with what is known and safe and predictable, then there's really no need for faith.

The fact is, I suspect most of us live most of the time as 'practical atheists': we live as if there is no need for God, because we never allow ourselves to get into situations where we have to trust him; we never get into the boat let alone agree to go across to the other side of the lake.

So let me ask you, "Where is your faith? What are you doing with Jesus that forces you to trust him, to lean on him, to depend on him for the outcome? Or does life just plod along from day to day without you ever having to take a deep breath, never having to take your foot off the floor of the swimming pool, never having to put what comes next into God's hands.

The disciples, I think, do show that kind of faith when they get into the boat with Jesus to go across to the other side, but they don't seem to get any credit for it. Apparently, getting into the boats to go to the other side is only 'entry-level' faith: it's beginners' stuff. For those who have been hanging out with Jesus and seeing him at close quarters, a deeper kind of faith is expected. So he said to them, "Where is your faith?"

And they could have answered, "Well, we showed faith when we woke you up in the middle of the storm! The storm had blown up, the boat was filling with water, we were out of control and in real danger and we turned to you and cried out for help. Wasn't that faith? What do you mean, Jesus, where is your faith? You were our only hope in that situation and we clung to you and cried out to you in desperation. Of course we showed faith!" And in a sense they're absolutely right. Don't we preachers always say that when you turn to Jesus you are showing faith, and it's true that the old Army chaplains in the first world war used to say, "There are no atheists in a shell hole." When things are out of control, when we or those whom we love are in danger, then it's natural to pray, to cry out to Jesus, to plead and to offer him everything, if only he will intervene and save us.

I think the problem with that kind of faith is that it's not coming from a place of peace and trust or a real resting in the Lord. Rather, it's coming from a place of desperation and panic, when we're so beside ourselves with fear and anxiety that we're not capable of noticing whether he's responding to us or not - it's as if he's asleep in the boat. So

where is your faith? What drives your prayer life? Is it anxiety fear and worry? Do you only turn to him to be saved from the storms raging in your life, whatever they look like?

The question I find I want to ask in the face of this passage is this: What would have happened if the disciples had decided not to wake Jesus up? Would the waves have swamped the boats and drowned them all? Seems a bit unlikely - if that was the case, why would Jesus have told them off if the danger was so real? ... or would the storm have continued and they would have been okay in the end, and it wouldn't have overwhelmed them, quite?

I wonder if you can see what I'm driving at? Maybe the deepest faith isn't about stopping storms and believing in miracles, that's the beginner's faith that looks for that sort of thing. Maybe true faith is about trusting in God's faithfulness and Jesus's presence in the middle of the storm, not expecting a smooth passage, but trusting in the close presence of the Lord, come what may. Not trying to tell God what to do, but rejoicing that he's here with us in the most difficult and unlikely circumstances, and allowing the knowledge of his presence to take away our fear. Faith doesn't cause the storms of life to die down. Rather it makes it possible for us to endure them, while still following Jesus into situations where we need actively to be trusting him.

So where is your faith this morning? Is it the faith that only turns to Jesus when there is no alternative? Or is it the faith that is willing to venture out, to embrace new challenges and risks in order to follow Jesus more closely? Or is it the faith that weathers the storms, that calmly trusts in the power of Jesus to control the forces of chaos which threaten us, the faith that recognises he is the Lord of sea and sky, that his power is that of the Creator, so that despite all appearances to the contrary, he can be trusted? Is it the faith that trusts in the Lord's presence and providence in the midst of our helplessness and turmoil?

All three kinds of faith, I believe, are genuine but it's the third kind that is most real in a crisis. When the storms rage and the Lord seems asleep and really good for nothing, the habit of trusting him will be a source of peace and hope. But that kind of faith can't suddenly be whipped up: it has to be practised and cultivated; it has to be absorbed day

by day; it's the result of discipline and routine; spending time with the Lord; reading the scriptures; receiving the sacraments; developing habits of holiness.

And when that faith becomes a habit and is part of us, then our attention will be fixed on the one who can save when we most need him; then our response won't be like the disciples in the boat who after everything has calmed down are taken completely by surprise and can only say, "Who is this?" as if they are completely baffled. Rather, our faith will be more like the faith of Thomas, after the resurrection, who simply falls to his knees and cries out, "My Lord And my God."