

“Who then is this, *... that even the wind and the sea obey him?”*

A sermon given on Third Sunday After Trinity 23rd June 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Attended Communion Service

Mark 4:35-41

“Why are you afraid, have you still no faith?”

I always used to think that Jesus was being a bit hard on the disciples in this story - they were scared, because in an open boat in the middle of open water, they were in danger of being drowned in a great storm. And I'm quite sure that if I was in their shoes, I would feel at least a smidgen of anxiety. So why does Jesus tell them off? And does this story teach that Christians should never be afraid or experience any kind of uncertainty? I hope not. Otherwise, I should make a very poor Christian indeed. Perhaps the clue to understanding this passage lies in Jesus's instruction at the beginning, "Let us go across to the other side." He means the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the great inland lake, which marked the boundary between Judea, the land where the Jewish people lived, and the Gentile or non Jewish territory to the east. So the Sea of Galilee marks a boundary, a kind of 'frontier zone' where you cross over from Jewish territory to pagan; from godly to ungodly; from clean to unclean.

And in Mark's gospel, Jesus spends a lot of time on and around the Sea of Galilee. He voyages on it at least four times. He seems to be comfortable, therefore, spending time on the margins in this 'unoccupied zone'. And he says to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." In other words, he's inviting them to join him on an adventure; to go with him somewhere new and unfamiliar; where they wouldn't know anybody; where the customs would be unfamiliar; where they would feel vulnerable and at risk. And so he's asking them to go with him across the Sea of Galilee to the other side. Jesus is asking his followers to trust him, to allow him to direct them and to guide and protect them, and as if to exemplify that trust, Jesus himself then promptly falls asleep in the stern of the boat.

And it's surely significant against that background that he later rebukes them when they are scared by the storm, when he says, "Why are you afraid? Have you no

faith?" It's almost as if he's saying, *"I thought you trusted me. I thought you realised when you came on this journey that you would feel helpless and vulnerable and that you were relying on me to look after you. I thought you knew that in coming with me on a new adventure, we would face challenges and hazards. So why are you so surprised? Didn't you understand the deal?"*

And I wonder whether these aren't still the same words that Jesus speaks to his people today. On the one hand, he's always saying to us, "Let's go across to the other side." He's always inviting us to leave behind what is safe and comfortable and familiar, in order that we may learn how to trust him more deeply. He's always giving us opportunities to venture into situations where it's no use relying on our own wisdom and ability, but where we have to look to him more intensely and trust him more wholeheartedly. I have no idea what situations you will be facing this week, but please don't shy away from something or somebody simply because they are unfamiliar and strange and make you feel uneasy. Your vulnerability and feelings of not being in control are an opportunity to grow in faith, to look to Jesus afresh and to cast your cares upon him.

On the other hand, Jesus is also frequently questioning our attitudes, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And maybe one reason why our fear and anxiety may be out of proportion is because we're not living within God's will. Maybe we are refusing to go with him to the other side, to the new situation; or maybe we thought we'd signed up to a different deal; maybe we thought that by agreeing to go with Jesus, it would all be about us; maybe we thought we would be the centre of the story, when in fact, God's purposes are so much bigger. And maybe part of our fear comes from the realisation that we're not really following Jesus at all.

The point of this story is not that Jesus can still the storm. The point is that if we are trusting Jesus and believe ourselves to be living in accordance with his will, then the storms just won't seem so scary. In my ministry, down the years, there have been many challenges and I have often felt inadequate and overwhelmed, but what has kept me going is the sense that, however helpless I feel sometimes, I'm nevertheless where God wants me to be. And that just gives you the strength and the confidence to keep going despite the storms.

Beverley minister is going through some storms at the moment: the pandemic has scattered us, so we've not been meeting together in the same way; our usual

routines and activities have been disrupted; and even if we wanted to go back to exactly the same old ways of doing things, we now find we don't have enough money to do it in the same way (at least not for long).

So the PCC, Church Council, is having to listen very carefully to Jesus's invitation to go across to the other side. And in the last week or so, they have spent three evenings looking at a vision strategy that involves new ventures, new ways of doing things and new risks which will force us to trust God more deeply, and to rely on his guidance and provision if we are not to be swamped by the storms that the world throws at us. And after the PCC meets again at the end of the month, we'll be wanting to share this more widely with the congregation and the choir and the staff and with everyone who shares this boat.

We're on a voyage across to the other side. It's an opportunity to grow in faith and discipleship, and for our awareness of the Lord to become more immediate and real. By venturing into new territory, we may have our eyes opened in new ways to the faithfulness and sheer reality of God, so that we too may be filled with awe, like those first disciples, as we exclaim, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Reading Texts

Mark 4:35-end

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"