



making the storm to cease

I spoke last week about a new media start up that is trying to do journalism in a way that doesn't always just react to the immediate events. It's called Tortoise media – and part of the way they are wanting to do things is to hold regular live “Thinkins” – which are, according to the journalists who are running them, like leader conferences in newspapers but on a longer term basis. Everyone present is invited to participate; so it's not a panel as such, more of a wider discussion, but people are invited to come and say what they think. We are hosting one here on Tuesday – for an hour between 6 and 7 – please come along if you'd like to. The topic which the journalists want to ask us about is whether the church should do more in terms of social action in society. This comes from a perception – a reality according to them – that the church as a whole – and here we're mostly talking about the Anglican church – is a place that people turn up to once or twice a month for prayers and not much else engagement happens.

Here at this church, this isn't the case – but in the light of that perception from the journalists, I want to talk a bit today about the opposite problem – which can affect churches like ours. Namely that we are very active on social transformation – but must always stay close to the reason we are doing it in the first place. In short, how do we resist becoming, in the words of our current archbishop – an “NGO with a pointy roof?”

Today's gospel speaks directly to this issue – as does our first extraordinary reading from that mysterious apocalyptic book of Revelation that we studied together last year.

I have to confess that I love this story in Luke's gospel of Jesus stilling the storm. It seems to me that contemporary life, especially city life, can

feel sometimes like we're being “swamped by the waves”. Waves of communication, waves of noise, waves of people, waves of emotion. And of course waves of suffering and disaster. After all, the people in the boat in our gospel were in danger for their lives. And many are today.

And so the first thing I want to say in reflecting on Jesus saving the disciples in the boat is that obviously, for some people today, there is no supernatural rescue from the storm. And that's why I will not preach a sermon that predicts that God will do this kind of thing for some and not for others. Not only would that be an out of date theology, it seems to me to be, in the light of some people's cries that echo the gospel cries “Lord save us – we are perishing” – it would be simply cruel.

Instead, reminding ourselves that the gospel is good news, maybe I can offer some reflections based in the psalm that that this gospel relies on – which Jesus and his friends would have known by heart: Psalm 107

They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;

²⁴*These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep.*

²⁵*For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof.*

²⁶*They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble.*

²⁷*They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end.*

²⁸*Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses.*

²⁹*He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still.*

³⁰*Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he*

bringeth them unto the haven where they would be.

In the busyness and inequality of a huge city like London, very often this psalm rings true; the city is full of these sights – not least in Piccadilly on a Saturday night- they “reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man” and – a devastating line I always find – “are at their wits end”. *Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distress. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet. So he bringeth them to the haven where they would be.*

In all the life decisions we have to make: what we are going to do next, how we are to live well - how to live a life of love and forgiveness, how to live a Christ-shaped life, how we can help to change things – we simply can't do that when we are in the midst of the storm. We will become overwhelmed and start to plead in our panic – that we are perishing. That the water is up to our neck.

In response, we learn lots of skills for prioritising things, getting through the thing we have to do, organising ourselves. But spiritually, after the example of this gospel, our task is to *listen for the voice of Christ*, who will bring us *to the haven where we would be*.

It is in this calm, centred, relieved place before God that we remember again who we are, what we are for and to whom we must return.

As a church too, this is our core purpose and task. As the pilgrimage group learned last year when we visited Berlin, Nuremberg and Auschwitz, we learned from our spiritual companion, Dietrich Bonhoeffer about setting sail into the *storm of events*.

*Daring to do what is right, not what fancy may tell you,
valiantly grasping occasions, not cravenly doubting –
freedom comes only through deeds, not through thoughts taking wing.
Faint not nor fear, but go out to the storm and the action,
trusting in God whose commandment you faithfully follow;*

freedom, exultant, will welcome your spirit with joy

This from the Lutheran pastor who lived through the toxicity of Nazi Germany.

For some people of course, this gospel story is exactly the kind of story that puts them off faith or makes it harder to believe. People will often say something along the lines of “If you really expect me to believe that a human being stopped the weather.....” this story somehow discredits the rest of it to a modern mind. For others, it's easily ignorable – it's the product of lesser minds, a more primitive culture – and so we can jettison it without too much delay and get on with what is easier to believe now.

In both of these attitudes to stories like this, we make the mistake that liberal Christians often accuse conservative Christians of making: literalism. We are the product of a culture that believes, really, that all real truth is located in the periodic table and oddly for a society so dependent on image and picture, it seems that we are unable to exercise our imaginations when it comes to religion. For thoughtful reflective Christians, we can't just hear this story read out and move on: there is work to do with it. We are asked to wrestle with Scriptural stories like this one – and listen hard for the good news of the gospel of Christ in amongst it.

The allegories, symbolism and parables in Scripture have layers upon layers of meaning that are often lost on us in 21st century. It helps us to know it in order better to understand – but then knowing it, we must contextualise it and find the meaning for today.

So our first task might be to take away our over-anxiety about historicity. The meaning of this story is not that Jesus could shout at the sky and stop the rain. If this actually happened, the response to this has to be – so what? This kind of power would inspire awe, not a little fear but in the end it's comic book religion – hardly helpful in the 21st century this side of scientific knowledge and interpretation. It is superhero religion – Wow he can stick to walls – he's amazing – Spiderman! Wow – he can walk on the surface of water – magic. So what? In the end this proves to be a diversion. In the ancient world, this story is

told to illustrate a deeper and much more challenging, more miraculous truth – that Jesus, uniquely manifesting the presence of God, is not defeated by something even as colossal and ungovernable as the power of the sea.

Theologically this is set alongside the fact that Jesus is, however, defeated by the greed and selfishness of human beings and is killed by them. Jesus is often in peril in the gospels – as in this story - but Jesus doesn't drown – Jesus is executed. We don't have a drowned man as our central symbol of Christianity – we have someone who was crucified. This is theologically significant.

In the ancient world, the sea was a symbol of evil. A long strand of teaching in the Hebrew Scriptures is that the sea is associated with evil powers – possibly because it is so perilous to humans. In the Genesis myth, the waters are chaotic – a sign of evil - until the Spirit broods over them and brings order from chaos. Leviathan – the great fish or whale – in the psalms and the Book of Jonah - also an acknowledged symbol of evil.

In the healing of the Gerasene man in the gospels – when the spirit was sent into the pigs – it is no coincidence that the demons in the pigs ended up running over a cliff into the sea – where they belonged.

The sea in the ancient world was a place of monsters and fear and peril.

So the meaning of this story for today is related to the place of monsters and fear and peril for us – wherever and whatever that may be.

Since the early 20th century, we have discovered that our psyche is a mysterious, swirling mass of desires, fears. We are driven by undercurrents we barely recognise - and every daily interaction is an attempt by us to navigate our way through these sometimes beautiful, sometimes calm, sometimes murky or stormy waters.

The world itself can seem like a place of monsters and fear and peril sometimes too: the unimaginable suffering in Syria, the horrific violence in DRC, the toxic regimes around the world from which people are fleeing and needing rescue.

The storm is raging for millions of children and adults in the world today. Many will not be rescued in this life despite the best efforts of others. Maybe the storm is raging for you; of regret, grief, pain or confusion. We often try to make our way through perilous waters. So far from being irrelevant, or ignorable superhero Christianity, this beautiful and profound story gives us hope and courage that even in the midst of our peril, at the moment we believe we are actually properly drowning – at the moment we are falling – and we think that hope is gone completely – there is a voice to listen for, to catch us. It won't stop the fear, and it won't stop us getting drenched; but this simple determination to listen can help us to direct our energies to a struggle that is worth it, not a futile struggle that simply draws us deeper under the waves.

Whatever did or did not happen 2000 years ago, there can hardly be a person alive who does not recognise that feeling that the disciples have of setting out in a burst of enthusiasm and energy, going well for a while – and then becoming overwhelmed.

If we feel that we need rescuing, what is that from - ourselves? Our fears? Someone else's influence? From greed or corruption – the seeds of which are in ourselves and which we see all around us in our society?

It's important recognise too that sometimes, however much we listen for it, the voice doesn't seem to come; God sleeps, and despite our struggles, we don't seem to be able to wake him.

Sometimes rescue doesn't come at all.

Sometimes rescue looks like death.

Sometimes rescue is death.

And sometimes we will hurt all our lives because rescue never came for someone we loved who was drowning. But this gospel picture gives us the chance to believe that at that very moment of panic, of freefall - God is present. God is there.

This rescue comes after the risk; the boat has set sail.

One of the phrases that the pilgrimage group used as we prepared for our trip last summer was that

the safest place for a boat is in the port. But that's not what boats are built for...

And this sense of adventure isn't just for life day to day – but also for our inner life. Perhaps one of the most perilous journeys we can undertake is inwards: which is where we need not so much Jesus the action man, but Christ the transcendent luminous generative presence made known to us by the Spirit. We need – yes of course God beside us – but actually we need also God beyond us. This is the Christ of our first reading today: Christ in eternity– illuminated by talk of creatures and precious stones; of jasper and cornelian, of the transcendent vision of the spiritual reality that is already here in eternity; the sea, not of storms but of glass and the radiant glory of God, a hint of which we can see in the most stunning day like today.

We want to believe, we want to live lives that are faithful and hopeful – even when there is so much evidence to the contrary – so many stormy waters for us personally and in the world that we often sink – or feel we're sinking. Sometimes it can seem that the more we struggle, the worse it gets. It happens not only in a situation of great danger – but in an ordinary day – when we think someone doesn't like us, or we have forgotten something really important, or we think our life is drifting or nearly over or whatever our fear is.

It can happen too to a church that feels itself to be simply firefighting – reacting to politics or social injustice without a sense that all we are and all we achieve finds its roots and peace and

stilling of the storm in the prayer and sacrament of this Eucharist.

We mistake our calling as the body of Christ if we are only struggling for justice; because the struggle, if it is in our own strength, will only draw us under the waves.

This powerful and beautiful picture of our waking a sleeping God, trusting that in our listening to Christ's voice is bringing to us the possibility of peace, is not an easy answer or a glib optimism; it is a deeply consoling presence – even if, even when, we feel we are drowning.

They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;

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Amen.