



## Sailing against the wind

A Pew Research Centre survey finds hardening attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers, and suspicion of Muslims and Jews, specially pronounced among those who attend church at least once a month (<https://goo.gl/gR52e8>). The study compared church-goers across the UK and continental Europe (18% of the adult population) to people who self-identify as agnostic, atheist, or "spiritual" but with no religious affiliation (24% of the population). Between these two groups, Christians are more likely to harbour negative views of migration and of ethnic and religious minority presence. This is baffling considering Jesus' command to "love your neighbour as yourself."

The Pew research conducted 24000 telephone interviews with randomly selected adults. Compared to people with no religion, church-goers were more likely to believe that "Islam is fundamentally incompatible with our culture and national values" (49%), agree that "our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others" (54%), favour reducing migration (38%), say that "migrants from the middle East are not honest" (26%), and would not accept a Jewish person into their family (14%). The non-Christian population is less likely to agree with these views. Is this telling us that, when it comes to charitable attitudes, non-Christians are more Christian than the Christians?

The theologian Linda Woodhead, urging churches to pay attention to these findings, concludes that we can no longer afford a simplistic view that, when people leave the Church, "religion gives way to atheism and a rejection of all aspects of religion." The Pew findings, she says, show that "we're seeing something more complex that we haven't fully got our heads around. In Europe, it's about people disaffiliating from the institution of the Church and the old authority figures ... and moving toward a much more independent-minded, varied set of beliefs" (<https://goo.gl/hgQAXp>).

In practice, that tells me that Jesus' command to love our neighbour needs a refresh: Christians

need to, not only love our neighbour, BUT GET TO KNOW AND LEARN TO LOVE LIKE OUR NON-CHRISTIAN NEIGHBOUR.

But, surely, like me, you will think immediately of the counter-example that St James's Piccadilly, and other churches we know, are to these raw statistics. We sail against the wind of intolerance: we are a church that not only welcomes but thrives on the diversity of people, culture, convictions of conscience and experience we represent. We run against hardening attitudes elsewhere.

This is worth reflection and a conversation we aren't able to have now. And I specially look forward to hearing in the coming days from our friends group who recently returned from visits to concentration camps in Poland and Germany; they will have something to say about their experience as a pilgrimage group in some way representing us as a church and facing that history with a hope for reconciliation, justice, and peace.

We live in this church, and thank God we are not alone in this, a common grace. Or, should I say, a grace uncommon. A Gospel of hope cutting against the winds of nationalism and border politics.

We are often reminded in public security planning to be "alert but not alarmed." I don't see the Pew Study findings, published only in May, and the negative sentiments they point to, as cause for alarm. And yet, something in me rails against such intolerance in the church. Where is the countercultural DNA of the New Testament churches where equality between slave and free, women and men, Jew and gentile at Christ's table was radically countercultural in the hierarchical, patriarchal, highly divided societies of the day (Galatians 3.28)? And so, drawing on our Gospel reading, something in me feels like the disciples who run to Jesus pleading "Aren't you going to do something? Why are you sleeping? Do you care that we are in a storm?"

In fact, there is something curious that happens in that episode. It's one of those stories that occurs in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the three gospels that, together, quilt in small and defined patches, the story of Jesus. We do well to pay special attention to this patch in the quilt because it depicts the episode from different angles three times over.

The disciples on the boat have real reason to fear: the winds are tossing the sea, the waves are beating against the boat, and they are taking on water. It was Jesus' idea that they take about across the lake. But Jesus is asleep in the stern. Mark's gospel adds for detail, he was asleep on a cushion.

Of course, Jesus turns out to be able to calm the wind and the waves. But what I find astonishing in this story is the change in the disciples: they start out fearing for their lives, but they end up filled with a different kind of fear.

Jesus stills the winds and the waves, as the Scripture says, "to a dead calm." Then we read in

MARK: And they were filled with great awe.

MATTHEW: They were amazed.

LUKE: They were afraid and amazed.

And so the disciples are left asking, just who on earth is this, even the wind and the waves follow his command?

I have been thinking this week about the migrant families from central America making their way to US border: many are driven by poverty to put their lives and the lives of their children in the hands of a human trafficking chain, only to end up in detention centres, facing criminal prosecution, and separated from their children.

Without weighing in on political ramifications, I have been thinking about who God is under those circumstances. And I don't simply mean how do people caught up in that border-crossing drama feel about God. Though of course that's important too. I mean what does God feel when people are in the grip of fear on such an outsized scale?

How does God behold people mirroring the fate of African migrants, who only last week were on a boat in the Mediterranean tossed between Italy and Spain, their journeys propelled by poverty

and fear of violence, and their tragedy compounded by the profit that traffickers can squeeze from human suffering? Who is this God who sees human suffering on our borders, and hears the cry at sea?

In our Gospel story, Jesus is there with us, in the storms of life, sharing our predicament. But as the disciples discover, Jesus is also someone who can do something about storms.

It isn't that they disciples are met by a master sailor, a captain steering a safe path through bow-breaking waves. In their fear, they are faced with the God of life. This God leaves me, as the disciples on the boat with Jesus, in amazement and a fearsome awe.

This is the God of Psalm 107, the God of the Hebrew Bible to whom Jesus prayed, the God of the illegal migrant, the asylum seeker, the clandestine refugee at sea.

In the Bible lectionary, the 107<sup>th</sup> Psalm is traditionally read with the story of Jesus calming the storm. Jesus speaks peace to the winds and the waves and prays to the God who speaks justice to the poor, the border crosser, the migrant worker, the exile and the refugee. I want to conclude by reading from the Psalm because I want us to seek together, to continue seeking this God. This God who many a non-Christian, in welcoming those "yearning to breathe free," has unknowingly already found.

I invite you to listen, to close your eyes if you wish, and let these words speak to you.

*Psalm 107*

*[adapted from the Hebrew text and the NRSV]*

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever.  
Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,

Are any of you redeemed from trouble?  
Were you tossed out from other lands,  
from east and west, from north and from south?

Some have wandered in desert wastelands,  
finding no way to an inhabited town;  
hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress;  
he led them through a narrow passage,  
until they reached a hospitable land.

Let them thank the LORD for his unfailing love,  
for his wonderful works to humankind.  
For he satisfies the thirsty,  
and fills the hungry with good things.

Some sat in darkness and in gloom,  
prisoners in misery and in irons,  
as if they had rebelled against the very words  
of God,  
and spurned the counsel of the Most High.

Their hearts were bowed down hard;  
they fell down, with no one to help.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he saved them from their distress;  
he brought them out of darkness and gloom,  
and broke their bonds asunder.

Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful works to humankind.  
For he shatters the doors of bronze,  
and cuts in two the bars of iron.

Some were sick through and endured affliction;  
they could not eat any kind of food,  
and they drew near to the gates of death.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he saved them from their distress;  
he sent out his word and healed them,  
and delivered them from destruction.

Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful works to humankind.  
And let them offer thanksgiving,  
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Some went down to the sea in ships,  
taking risks on the high seas;  
they saw the deeds of the LORD,  
his wondrous works in the deep seas.

Then the stormy wind rose,  
and lifted up the waves of the sea.  
They mounted up to heaven,  
and were sent crashing down to the depths;  
and their courage melted away in their calamity;  
They reeled and staggered on the decks,  
at their wits' end.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he brought them out from their distress;  
he made the storm be still,  
and the waves of the sea were hushed ...