

Sermon CCSY 3rd Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

1 Sam 17:32-49; Ps 9:9-20; 2 Cor 6:1-13; Mk 4:35-41

For those of you old enough to remember, there's a line in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, when Jesus appears before King Herod at his trial, and Herod says to him: "Prove to me that you're no fool; walk across my swimming pool." Show me, amuse me, prove to me who you really are, is what he's saying. And our story today may seem at first exactly that: Jesus calming the storm at sea: Jesus the wonder-worker, Jesus who impresses people by his spectacular displays, Jesus who proves himself and makes us ooh and aah.

But that's not actually what our Gospel story is about. It's not a feat to impress the likes of Herod; it's not a display of pyro-technics.

Indeed, to understand this story at all, we need to comprehend something of the Old Testament imagery that lies at the heart of it. In the Old Testament God is described as the 'rider on the storm', who overcomes the waters of primeval chaos, the one who brings the world into being out of turmoil, who parts the seas, who rescues his people again and again from the waters that would overwhelm them. In other words, it's the language of creation that's later used for redemption. And that's what we see Jesus doing in this story: overcoming the waters of chaos, silencing the threatening waves, possessing the same divine power that brought the world into being, that brought order and beauty and tranquillity out of chaos.

Indeed, this story is part of a whole build-up of 'mighty acts' in the Gospel of Mark, where we witness Jesus's power to teach in parables, to cast out demons, to overcome long-term illness and even to reverse death itself.

Within that narrative context, Mark's image of the terrified disciples in today's story is a vivid one—some of these people in the boat, you will recall, are experienced fishermen and they don't panic easily; they know how treacherous the Sea of Galilee can be, and how powerless they are before the pounding waves. And, in a way, far removed though we may be from their world, we can identify with them. Because we all go through times of 'storm' in our lives—whether it's our personal lives or our families or our career or our friendships. Sometimes things happen to us or to the people closest to us, which plunge us into chaos. Our well-ordered lives threaten disintegrate, our coping strategies break down, the structures that hold us together begin to crumble. And, like the disciples, we're left feeling helpless and terrified and abandoned.

(Actually, if we want to read an account of the ‘storms’ of life from someone who really knew what suffering was about, we need to re-read our passage from 2 Corinthians—where Paul outlines his extraordinary apostolic sufferings for the gospel.)

Yet there’s something immensely comforting about the image in Mark of Jesus asleep in the stern of the boat, his head on a cushion, while the storm rages around him. The disciples may be terrified and reeling, but nothing touches Jesus’ repose. And when they wake him he calms the storm with precisely the same authority he’s shown over illness and over demons and over death. And he rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. How could they be afraid with him asleep in the boat? How could they forget his reassuring presence, the calm that he himself represents?

And it’s the same for us. In our ‘storms’ it often feels as if God is absent, as if God has abandoned us; but he hasn’t—he’s with us, in all the struggle and the fear and the chaos: asleep, perhaps, but still with us; and able to calm the waters, able to give us peace, to assure us that, whatever happens, we are always and everywhere in his hands. And that theme is apparent in our readings: in David before Goliath, confident that God is with him; and in Paul in the midst of suffering—sure of, and trusting in, the certainty of God’s presence.

And so the Gospel this morning is a message of comfort and reassurance.

But it’s more than that. There’s more than comfort in this passage; there’s also something the disciples themselves find very disquieting in this whole episode. Their fears are calmed with the dropping of the storm. Yet when they look at Jesus and begin to reflect on who he is, they find themselves now filled with an entirely new and different kind of fear. Not afraid now of drowning, not afraid for their safety, but afraid in the presence of the very One who has rescued them.

There’s a passage in *The Lion, the Witch and Wardrobe*, where the children, hearing about the lion Aslan (who is the Christ-figure of these stories) are very apprehensive about meeting him. “But is he a tame lion?” they ask Mr and Mrs Beaver nervously. “Oh no,” comes the shocked reply. “He’s not a *tame* lion. But he’s good, and that’s what matters.” There are parts of the church these days who’ve made Jesus into a very tame person indeed. Bruce Dawe in one his poems, in a Catholic context, speaks of people who prefer the Presbytery tabby (the Vicarage cat) to the lion of Judah. It’s the same attitude: the same domesticating of what is in reality wild and untamed, what is utterly mysterious and beyond us.

So, today, we're assured of comfort in our distress, in the storms and chaos of our lives. But that placid figure asleep on a cushion, as our small boats go up and down on the raging waters, is not a figure to be taken for granted. He is awe-inspiring, in his own way terrifying, even in his love for us—perhaps especially in his love for us. “Who is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?” the disciples ask, with this new fear clutching at their hearts. Not a fear that diminishes them, not a fear for their safety, but that Old Testament fear of God which, the psalmist tells, is actually the beginning of wisdom. “It is a fearful thing”, says the writer to the Hebrews, “to fall into the hands of the living God.” Not because we're afraid of rejection or damnation or abandonment, but simply because God is God. There is a terror in God that has nothing to do with judgement, but is simply the reflection of who God is: God's presence and power, God's love and mercy.

In our eucharist today, we are offered the very life of God—in bread and wine, in flesh and blood. And, yes, it's about comfort and welcome and hospitality and love—all of that, unquestionably. Yet it's also, at the same time, about awe and reverence in the presence of God, the God who created the universe, who brought order out of chaos, the God revealed in Jesus Christ and in the mighty acts of his ministry. It is this God—fearful and awesome, transcendent and holy—who is given over into our hands.

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