

## SERMON/REFLECTION TRINITY 9 WEEK 19 YEAR A 9 AUGUST 2020

The world is in a mess at the current time. You don't need me to list all the things that are wrong. It's not just coronavirus, though the pandemic has brought into the open issues that have been present for a while: individual rights versus the common good, overcrowding in some sections of society and provision for the elderly for example. The church also faces challenges. What we'd call conventional involvement has been in decline for years – worship on Sunday, taking on responsibilities, financial support. Giving has declined – not individual amounts, but numbers of givers. Clergy are spread more thinly across parishes, which does little to arrest the decline and shows how some parishes depend too much on the clergy. Some clergy like that, of course. The pandemic has accelerated changes that were already happening.

What goes on in the wider world has always affected the church. The development of printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century had a massive influence. The bible could be published in languages that people understood, and pamphlets promoting religious views could be circulated. In our own time television, the internet and social media, are having just as revolutionary an effect. Do we regard them as dangers or opportunities? How do we embrace the new without leaving some people behind?

I wish I had some straightforward solutions. I think they can only come by serious discussion, not laid out in a sermon. But I take comfort from today's readings. The prophet Elijah despaired at the state of religion in Israel. He tells the LORD,

'The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

The LORD'S answer to him is twofold. First he tells Elijah that he has things for him to do: anoint a couple of kings and someone to become a prophet in his place. Then he tells Elijah that actually he is not the only one left: there are seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal, the pagan god. Our situation may be similar. The outlook may seem bleak, but God has things for us to do. And there may be many more people than we imagine who are 'keeping the faith.' We are not on our own.

The boat in which the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee was battered by the wind and waves. S. Matthew, the gospel writer, doesn't record any fears they have about the storm, but he reports they were terrified at the figure walking on the water towards them. That might get us thinking more generally: perhaps what frightens us will turn out to be the answer to our problems.

As so often, Peter acts on the mixture of faith and doubt present amongst all the disciples. When he sets his eyes on Jesus and obeys his command he can do the miraculous. When his attention moves elsewhere he is in danger of perishing. He calls, “Lord, save me!” which Jesus does.

The twin themes of this account are the identity of Jesus and the dependence of the disciples on him, their Lord. There are frequent references in the Old Testament to God having mastery over the waters, which often symbolise chaos. A verse from Psalm 77 is particularly relevant:

Your way was through the sea, your path through the mighty waters... . (v. 19)

So Jesus shares God’s power. There’s another clue to Jesus’ identity which is easily missed in our translation. When Jesus tells the frightened disciples, “It is I,” his actual words are an emphatic “I am.” I am: the name God tells Moses he, God, is to be known by. Jesus claims the divine name as well as showing he has divine power. The conclusion to the account is the disciples in the boat worshipping Jesus and saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Jesus refers to Peter’s ‘little faith’. It is an expression Jesus uses four other times in Matthew’s gospel when talking to his disciples. Christians of later ages – from the communities which first heard the gospel read to them as they gathered, right up to the church of our time – can hear Jesus speaking to them. We could picture the church facing difficulties as the boat in the storm. We hear Jesus telling us to take heart. He is the Son of God. In him is God’s nature and power. We hear him bidding us come to him, even if this means we must step into stormy waters. He responds when in desperation we cry, “Lord, save us!” We hear him gently rebuking us for our lack of faith – our reliance on our own powers rather than our dependence on him. A faith that sustains us is as necessary now as it ever has been: a faith that seeks to do what God commands; a faith that we share with others even when we feel alone and powerless.