

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 9 WEEK 19 YEAR A 13 AUGUST 2017

Most of us like the feeling of being in control – maybe of other people, maybe of events, maybe of our own prospects. It's not necessarily a bad thing to seek control: sometimes we say that someone needs to get a grip of a particular situation. When there's uncertainty, people respond in two ways: some will want to do something; others will wait to see what happens.

Peter feels he has to do something when he and the other disciples see someone walking over the Sea of Galilee's wind-whipped waters to their boat – or rather he acts when he realises it is Jesus, who invites him to come. It's easy for us to dismiss Peter as being over-enthusiastic, but he is making a response of faith. He is being true to himself. There are other occasions in the gospels where Peter feels he has to get involved. Last week we kept the feast of the Transfiguration, and heard how Peter wanted to make booths on the mountainside for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. He wanted to do what he could for them, though maybe there's a hint that he wanted to exert some control over an event that was unsettling him. We like to put things in categories we can understand – build our own huts. In the first two Sundays of September we'll read how Peter, in a moment of inspiration declares that Jesus is 'the Christ, the Son of the living God,' but soon afterwards rejects the idea that the Christ will suffer. He feels he has the best interests of Jesus at heart; he has to stop this misguided plan.

Anyway, getting back to the Sea of Galilee, Peter takes the step of faith, which works for a while. He walks towards Jesus. Then the reality of the conditions around him hits back – had he forgotten about the wind? – and he begins to sink. "Lord, save me!" he cries: a cry of faith mixed with desperation. Jesus reaches out and catches Peter. They get into the boat, the wind ceases, and Matthew the gospel writer describes how this event reveals to the disciples who Jesus is. They worship him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." This is remarkably similar to what Peter would say later, as I mentioned a moment ago.

Jesus is present in conditions of adversity. It is Jesus who saves in response to a cry of faith when we have no power to control what is happening. This agrees with S. Paul's message to the church in Rome, when he quotes from the prophet Joel: 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' Paul is in fact making a distinction between two ways of seeking salvation. The first way is by doing the right things – an approach which puts us in control, at least in theory. We choose to do what is right. This is the salvation, the righteousness that comes from the law. For much of his life this had been Paul's approach. But whatever God's provision in the past had been,

Paul now realises that God has acted in Christ to save the world. Salvation, for Jews who have the law, and Gentiles who don't, is now available through faith in Christ. It is freely given, rather than earned through keeping a set of rules for conduct.

Jesus reaches out to Peter in a moment of crisis. Our Old Testament reading sees God taking the initiative with the prophet Elijah at his hour of need. Today we'd probably diagnose Elijah with bipolar disorder, manic depression. He is fresh from a triumph at Mount Carmel where he called down fire from heaven and destroyed the false prophets of Baal, a god of the Canaanites. But his confidence in God has evaporated in the face of threats from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. He runs away, sits under a tree and asks to die. An angel brings him food and drink, and he makes his way to Mount Horeb where our reading begins. He complains to God that his people, Israel, have become followers of Baal; he, Elijah, is the only faithful person left. God gives him an answer, not in wind, earthquake or fire, traditional symbols of God's presence, but in 'a sound of sheer silence', whatever that means. It's a difficult phrase to translate. Sometimes it's translated as 'a still small voice of calm.' God's answer, lifting Elijah out of his low state, is in two parts. First, he has things for Elijah to do: anointing a couple of kings, and another prophet, Elisha, to continue his work. Second, Elijah's not in fact on his own: there are another seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal. God is in control.

As I said at the beginning, we may like being in control. But life frequently doesn't give us the choice. We are affected by other people's decisions. We are subject to the natural processes of life. Accidents happen; the unexpected occurs. It may be for good or ill. As a church we are affected by wider society. Sometimes it may feel as if we're in a boat being buffeted. Faith calls us to look outside our comfort zone – to see our Lord coming to us in whatever context: personal life, home and family, work, church and society. It is he who brings a greater perspective to our bounded vision, who supports the limited steps of faith we take, who invites us into the salvation which is his gift.