

## SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 3 WEEK 12 20 JUNE 2021

There are various ways of approaching passages of scripture, and each may be appropriate for a particular situation. Today's gospel provides a good example for different approaches. It's the account in S. Mark's gospel of Jesus being asleep in a boat manned by the disciples, several of whom were experienced fishermen. Despite that, they were overwhelmed by a storm, and called on Jesus, whom they called 'Teacher' to do something. He stilled the storm and they were safe.

One approach is symbolic. The disciples stand for Christians. The boat stands for the Church. The wind and waves stand for the attacks of the world on the Church. What Christians have to do is call upon their Lord in prayer, and he will deliver them from the danger. This way of understanding the incident – how it can be applied to present day life – goes back to about 200 ad, so from quite an early stage in the church's existence. It is relevant at times of persecution; less so if the church recognises that there are some in the 'world' who are actually doing God's work, and the church may wish to cooperate with them.

Another approach is personal. There are times when we feel buffeted by the 'storms of life': events which we cannot control but have devastating effects on us. Thinking and praying on Jesus' power to still the storm on the Sea of Galilee and asking him to deliver us from what we fear can give us the assurance we desperately need. Scripture can speak to us as we read it devotionally, rather than with a 'what did it mean in the first place?' approach.

But what did it mean in the first place? There's a great deal behind the simple story Mark tells. In Jewish tradition, and in many civilisations, water is a symbol of chaos, a place where powers of evil hold sway. There's a good example of this in today's Old Testament reading, from the closing chapters of the book of Job. Most of the book is a long poem voiced by Job, who has suffered many things, and his four comforters as they're called. They all address the question why God permits good people to suffer. In the final chapters God speaks to Job, doesn't really answer the question, but indicates that humans cannot fully understand life in the created world: they weren't there when he made it. He also declares his power over evil. He 'prescribed bounds' for the unruly sea, and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped." That's an echo of the account of creation at the beginning of the bible, where God separated the waters so that dry land could appear.

Today's gospel incident has some similarities with the story of Jonah. When a storm blew up he too was asleep in the boat. The storm was calmed by the sacrifice of Jonah, though God sent the whale by which he was preserved. For Christians the ultimate victory over evil is the death of Christ, followed by God raising him from the dead.

The climax of the gospel reading is not the calming of the storm, but the exchange between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus asks them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" They don't answer him but say to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" The answer should be clear: this is someone who is doing what only God can do. It should be clear to readers of Mark's gospel. He opens it with the declaration, 'The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' The rest of the gospel, with Jesus' teaching, his miracles and his encounters, shows that Jesus is the Son of God.

The church will flourish when it enables people to encounter Jesus, ask the question, 'Who is this?', and answer with faith: faith that he is God's Son who delivers from evil. This is true for those of us who are established churchgoers, ready to be described as Christian. Are we open to Christ revealing himself to us in worship, prayer, fellowship and teaching? Or do we think that that might have happened a long time ago, but now we just come to church because it's what we do? We might be worried about what's happening to the church – falling attendance, shortage of money – but do we hear Jesus saying to us, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Jesus may save us from the storms of life; he also challenges us to grow in faith and understanding.

Those who do not come to church in the sense of entering the building can nevertheless encounter Christ through the people who make up the true church, the company of the faithful. This requires a shift in traditional understanding. Mission is not about getting people into the church building (though that might follow). It's about the gospel getting into Christians' lives from Monday to Saturday so that others want to know more about the teacher we follow: the Son of God who has power over evil.