

## **Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity 2018**

**(Evensong)**

**Matthew 8: 23 – end**

When I have parties of school children in the Priory I'm keen not to teach them about religion, but to teach them from religion. They can sit in the classroom and learn about religion. They can look at pictures of features and artefacts in a church building and learn a whole glossary of terms by rote: this is a font, this is a lectern, this is a pulpit, this is an altar. But actually I'm not bothered whether they can recite the contents page of a fixtures and fittings catalogue. I don't want them to learn *about* religion: I want them to learn *from* religion. I want them to appreciate that when people come here they have an encounter with God that changes them and transforms their lives; and that the features of this building help them interpret and articulate what that encounter is all about.

I'm not bothered whether the word font is part of their vocabulary, but I want them to know I believe once you've been through the waters of baptism life is never the same again. I'm not bothered whether the word altar is in their vocabulary, but I want them to know I believe that once you've received that bread and that wine Jesus is incorporated into your life and you're equipped and commissioned to live and work to his praise and glory. I want them to know that the features of this building are not just fancy and grand: I want them to know these features minister to us.

So I get them to sit in the pews and look at the roof structure. And get them to imagine that we turn the whole thing upside down so that that timber structure is not over our heads but under our feet. And I ask them what it would look like. The answer is a boat, or a ship. And then I ask them to imagine that someone worked in a ship, perhaps as part of the armed forces, perhaps not. What would we say that person was a member of? The navy. When we're talking about

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

ships or things to do with ships we often use words that begin with the sound “nave”, like navy or naval. And when we sit in those pews, we’re sitting in the nave, because it’s like a ship.

When we sit here we’re on a journey of faith in a ship: on our way from our lives being transformed through baptism; and on our way to receiving that encounter with Jesus that commissions us to go out again. And as we journey in the ship of faith we’re hearing scripture, we’re reflecting on it; and our little faith is growing to be a little bit less little than it was. And all the time it’s like being on a rough sea and we’re not always convinced that Jesus is with us: we’re anxious because he often seems absent. Our experience of being church is quite like the experience of the disciples caught in the storm on the lake in Matthew chapter 8.

Ow, we may want to be wary about this obsessing about our identity as the church. It’s not a major

theme of discipleship in the Bible. It’s only in Matthew’s Gospel that the word Church is used. It’s typical of Matthew’s concern with the identity and integrity of the church to relate a miracle of Jesus in terms which cast an inherited recollection of his life in a metaphor for the life of the church. We wouldn’t get that elsewhere.

And we might be less concerned about what it is to be a group of pious people gathered in a club. We might well be more concerned to have an apostolic faith, one that’s more about being sent out than gathered in. We might be more concerned with how we live the non-religious parts of our lives in the light of the faith through which we’ve been transformed than how we sit around together in this nave, this ship-like structure being church.

But being a Christian is a corporate experience. It is about gathering before we’re sent, however important being sent may be. The Christian journey is a shared

experience: we are built up together as the body of Christ, a community of faith. And there's something in those few verses about the attitude of the disciples caught in a storm which is instructive for us as a community of faith today.

There's a commendable humility to the disciples' faith. They have faith. It's not that they don't. But they're not cock sure about it. They need to cry out to Jesus. And even when the miracle has been performed, they go on questioning, they go on doubting. "What sort of man is this?" they say. They don't allow themselves to think they've got Jesus sewn up; to think they're sorted; and to take their salvation for granted. There's a recognition of the mystery and the awesomeness of Jesus.

This contrasts, of course, with the demoniacs. They know precisely who Jesus is. That's why they shout out to him and address him as the Son of God. They're not afraid of his absence: they are afraid of his

presence. And they're afraid because they know the presence of Jesus is a threat to them. It's a lovely, amusing story about the pigs hurling themselves over the cliffs – the last laugh is on the demons. But it is also deadly serious. Jesus may calm storms, but he also challenges security. Perhaps we would be best off to acknowledge our insecurity: "Lord save us! We are perishing!" And we're in this ship of faith together, dependent on his grace.

Amen.