

Third Sunday after Trinity 2021 (20.06.2021)

2 Corinthians 6: 1 – 13; Mark 4: 35 – end

The story of the storm being stilled in the Gospel reading this morning is a really good story. Never mind all the spiritual freight it carries: just as a story it's really good. It's short, it's to the point and it's dramatic. And yet, even in those few verses, the story is beautifully crafted. You can feel the tension mounting. You can sense the anxiety of the disciples. And you can be struck by the authority of Jesus. Be still! That's all he needs to say. And all the force of nature is at his command. And when we're told that the disciples were then filled with great awe, we have no difficulty identifying with exactly how they felt. Consummate storytelling; but, of course, storytelling that does carry a lot of spiritual freight.

When the story was first related, it probably primarily served to affirm the authority of Jesus. This is a man, who needs to be carried in a boat (he can't get away

from the crowds and to the other side of the lake without one) but he is in charge of the sea that carries the boat. The man is divine. He speaks with nothing short of the authority of God himself.

The next generation, receiving the written text, may well have been struck by the way the boat was going to the other side. It was taking Jesus away from the Jewish community, in which he'd been born and brought up, and was taking him towards his first encounter in gentile territory. The early church had a bumpy ride, making that transition from understanding themselves as an expression of Judaism into coming to terms with being a world faith which isn't confined by the culture and customs of Judaism. It is with the divine command and authority of Jesus that we travel towards something scary or new - be it in that original context stepping outside Judaism; or later contexts facing various forms of persecution; or in our own context heading into a post-pandemic world which will require us to inhabit a new culture,

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with different customs, to the one on which we were floating along before coronavirus struck.

But whilst this reading does invite us to recognise and accept the authority of Jesus, it also makes us ask questions about ourselves, about the nature of our own faith. We do identify with the disciples to whom Jesus asked those piercing questions: Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith? We are in a boat with Jesus. And we are often anxious that he's asleep on a cushion somewhere towards the back.

The part of the church in which we are sitting, on these pews, is called the nave. The choir is sitting in the chancel, because they chant from there, but the body of the people, sitting in the body of the church, are in the nave. The word nave sounds a bit like navy, as in Royal Navy. It's all to do with boats and ships. The idea is that when we form church, either by gathering here, in these four walls or via the internet, or by being dispersed across the lives of service into which

worship commissions us, we are in a boat on the sea of life. When school children come, I invite them to look up at the roof structure, and then imagine the building being turned upside down so that the roof looks like the hull of a boat, the nave, the ship of faith carrying us on the sea of life.

Because of the coronavirus restrictions, we're not using the whole building. So the Chapel of St. John of Bridlington is closed. There's literally a hole in the wall where we've removed this altar to place it temporarily on this step and limit the theatre of action these few square feet. But in that chapel there is a bust of St. John of Bridlington, commissioned from the sculptor Stephen Carvill to commemorate the 900th anniversary of the Priory Church being founded. In that sculpture St. John is cradling the Priory Church in a boat, with choppy waters beneath it. Again it's the idea of us being on the sea of life, held secure by Jesus, or in this case, by St. John in whose saintliness we have something which points us to Jesus.

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The monastery over which St. John presided here was an Augustinian Priory, a religious community which followed a rule of life based on the teachings of St. Augustine of Hippo. He wrote a sermon on this passage of the Bible we're considering this morning, the calming of the storm in Mark's Gospel. I just want to read to you a passage from that sermon¹, a passage dwelling on how the story relates to our lives of faith.

When you have to listen to abuse, that means you are being buffeted by the wind. When you anger is roused, you are being tossed by the waves. So when the winds blow and the waves mount high, the boat is in danger, your heart is imperilled, your heart is taking a battering. On hearing yourself insulted, you long to retaliate; but the joy of revenge brings with it another kind of misfortune – shipwreck. Why is this? Because Christ is asleep in you. What do I

mean? I mean you have forgotten his presence. Rouse him, then; remember him, let him keep watch with you, pay heed to him . . . A temptation arises: it is the wind. It disturbs you: it is the surging of the sea. This is the moment to awaken Christ and let him remind you of those words: “Who can this be? Even the winds and the sea obey him.”

Amen.

¹ Sermon 63. 1 -3 cited in Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament II Mark, ed Thomas C. Oden & Christopher A. Hall, [1998] Inter Varsity Press, Illinois