

THE STILLING OF THE STORM

PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean

Sunday, June 21st 2009

Trinity 2

Mark 4:35-end

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

I still have vivid memories of the night in 1987 that Michael Fish will never forget, when a hurricane ripped through much of Southern England and we all woke up to dustbins blown like ping-pong balls, trees uprooted like matchsticks. We were faced with the frightening, elemental forces of nature - a storm.

The Sea of Gallilee, which always looks so tranquil on those picture postcard views that you often see of it, is famous for its sudden storms. Surrounded by hills, the sea is almost like water held in a basin. At one side there is a gap in the hills and the wind can pour in through this gap like a fury and leave almost as quickly.

The story of the stilling of the storm is based around one of these sudden and ferocious storms. It has the nature of an eye witness account. It is written in the present tense as if being recounted by someone who was there and is reliving the experience. There are all sorts of unnecessary details. The fact that there are other boats, the cushion that Jesus is sleeping on, and things like that. And it has the vivid breathlessness which characterises an "I was there and I saw it" sort of experience.

I want to get to the heart of this story by picking out two questions and a command.

First, the command which you find in verse 39 - "Be quiet, be still".

Older translations miss the meaning of this entirely and the Revised Standard Version translates this as "Peace, be still", which is lovely and tranquil, but wrong!

Literally, these words mean "Silence, be muzzled". This is a term you would almost use to address a wild animal. It is harsh and authoritative. It is the same terminology that Jesus uses against demons in three other places in Mark's Gospel (1:25, 3:12, and 9:25). In other words Jesus addresses the raging storm as if it is a force battling to dominate and destroy him just as the demons aimed to dominate and destroy people.

This idea of a storm as a force seeking to control and possess us, dominate and destroy us, is a powerful symbol of the way we are all subject to the influence of forces upon us, which act upon us negatively.

We talk about the forces of economics, or market forces, things which seem to be totally beyond our control yet they hold our jobs, our homes and our livelihoods at their whim.

We use the expression 'force of circumstance' to describe events which are beyond our control on a day-to-day basis.

Then there are the forces of illness, sickness and disease which can rush upon us like a sudden storm.

There is the force of cultural change, with a world that is changing so fast that we find ourselves powerless to stop it.

And then there are the forces from dysfunctional relationships in our past, relationships which have gone wrong and left us with a legacy of fear or guilt or pain from which we are unable to break free.

It is a feature of Jesus' ministry that he confronts all of these forces which want to control us, possess us, dominate or destroy us.

I have always been struck by the fact that when Jesus confronts disease in the Gospels, his immediate response was not sympathy but anger. Anger at what the disease has destroyed.

When he confronts demonic forces he faces them down with a rebuke and here, where he is confronted by the unruly forces of nature, he meets them with an authoritative command.

St Paul picks up exactly this idea when he portrays life as a spiritual battle against those forces in life which seek to corrupt, threaten, spoil and destroy.

Those who deny this spiritual side to life, who want to explain evil away as a sort of social construct, to my mind fly in the face of the evidence. A force of evil is real and tangible and what we need above everything else is someone with the authority to stand up and say 'Silence, be muzzled' in the teeth of the storm.

At a very basic and elemental level the stilling of the storm points us to a God who has the ultimate power over all forces of evil, and the question therefore raised by the story is 'why doesn't God use that power more often?'

Which leads me to the first of the two questions in the passage, namely the anguished cry of the disciples in the teeth of the storm recounted for us in verse 38 "Don't you care?".

This is a question humankind has asked of God since the dawn of time, on every occasion of danger or disaster when God seems to be asleep on his pillow, seemingly unaware of the disaster or unwilling to act. Don't you care?

It is, of course, a legitimate question. In the midst of a suffering world, does God care? And, if he does, why doesn't he wake up and do something?

I have just finished reading "The Shack" - a novel about a man whose young daughter is abducted and killed. Some years later he receives a note purporting to be from God himself asking him to meet with God at the very shack where the murder took place. Though this book has a bit too much 'American Pie' for my palate, it is an interesting reflection on a Job-like encounter in which a man has the opportunity to question God directly about the death of his daughter.

I have preached many sermons on suffering during my years in the ministry. My major contention is that Christianity alone provides a coherent answer to the question of how a God of love can allow suffering, for Christianity alone proclaims a God who is born into our world, takes flesh and blood, experiences our human condition from the inside and ends up nailed to a wooden cross.

God experiences suffering along with us and for all time we can be sure that he is there when we endure pain, hurt, rejection, tragedy and suffering.

But today I want to make just two observations about this question "Don't you care?". The first is this. God is big enough for us to ask the question, however rudely we put it to him, with whatever spite or impudence we ask it.

Go and look in the Psalms. They are full of people asking passionate or impudent questions of God. You find the disciples asking similarly impertinent questions of Jesus throughout Mark's Gospel.

It is reassuring to know that it is okay to take God, shake him by the shoulders and say "Don't you care?".

The second observation, which is also the second question, put not by the disciples this time but by Jesus, is this, "Why are you frightened, have you no faith?".

For just as God allows us to question him in the face of evil, so we must allow God to question us.

Jesus has just completed a teaching session, the like of which you rarely come across in the Church. He is striving throughout Mark's Gospel to help the disciples understand who he is, the difference his presence makes in their everyday lives and the power of faith in believing in him. Test number one, following this teaching, the storm on the lake - Fail.

For the fact is with Jesus in the boat in their midst the disciples had all the resources they needed to face the storm and to confront the forces which sought to overcome them but they failed to recognise it. They saw the storm alone and they forgot Jesus.

It may seem harsh for Jesus to berate them for getting frightened, to chastise them for their lack of faith, but it is worth remembering his confident assertion of their failure, for ironically this reflects his belief that they could have coped, they could have faced the forces availed against them and come through, if only they had conquered their fear and activated their faith.

It was Malcolm Muggeridge, the journalist and social commentator, who once said that a world without suffering would be like hell itself. For it is suffering ironically that has the potential to draw forth all that is good and noble and best in our humanity, if we rise to the challenge of overcoming our fears and activating our faith; faith I mean in the abiding and enduring presence of Christ in the midst of all that we face.

Make no mistake, each of us in this coming week will encounter something which acts on our lives rather like that storm acted on the boat - it will buffet us, drive us, control us, drag us down. Whatever storms we face we can take heart from the fact that with Jesus in our midst, even if at times he seems fast asleep on a pillow, there is nothing for us to fear.

In all you face, for good or ill this week, may you know to the very core of your being this calm, this tranquillity, this serenity, this peace which passes all understanding.

'And Jesus awoke and said to the sea "Silence, be muzzled", and the wind ceased, and there was a great calm'.