

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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## EXODUS - CRISIS

27<sup>th</sup> May 2018

Exodus 14:5-22

Mark 4:35-41

How do you define a crisis? One definition is that it is “any event that is going (or is expected) to lead to an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an [individual](#), [group](#), [community](#), or whole [society](#).” Another formal way of looking at the idea of crisis is that “Crises are deemed to be negative changes in the [security](#), [economic](#), [political](#), [societal](#), or [environmental affairs](#), especially when they occur abruptly, with little or no [warning](#).” However, chances are that when you think of the idea of crisis, you think of a testing time or an emergency event. It is a crisis when someone is involved in an accident, or when there is a burst pipe in your home, or when you are overseas and lose your passport. It is a crisis any time you feel panic in your chest, and find your breathing is erratic and you flail around trying to find a way to cope with something.

Few of us like finding ourselves in a crisis situation, although there can be a bit of guilty onlooker's interest in watching someone else coping with things in their own life – when we are not affected. Few of us like crises happening, but here is one thing we should remember: over and over in Scripture and in listening to people's life stories, we find that when there is a crisis, God is most obviously present.

You will see this very clearly in the episode from the Exodus which we read this morning. Here are the people of Israel, who have escaped from bondage in Egypt, with all the emotional as well as practical upheaval that this has caused in their lives, and now they are aware that they are being followed and pursued by the Egyptian army. You see, it is one thing to send away your foreign workers when they are seen to be bringing bad fortune on you, but it is another thing to organise the life and work of the country without them – which could be a statement which speaks to our own political situation. The Egyptians missed the Hebrews. They missed their work, and their contribution to the economy. They experienced an economic crisis without them. And now they were gone, and the disasters of the plagues had stopped, they wanted them back. Well, they hadn't gone far yet, so they would just go and get them.

And this was a crisis for the people of Israel. It was a personal crisis for each one of them, because danger threatened their persons, and it was an unstable situation affecting a group. No doubt there was panic in their chests and their breathing became ragged, and they did what people have so often done in crisis situations: they looked for someone to blame. No matter the urgency of our crises, it seems that for many people there is still time and energy to spend on blaming. In this case the obvious person to blame was Moses, and so they rounded on him furiously.

“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?” When we are dealing with a crisis, sometimes we are not rational, we are not measured, we are not even sensible. In crisis we leap to a worst-case scenario, and we can lash out.

And Moses had his answer ready. “Do not be afraid, stand firm and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.” Of course, it is easier to say “Do not be afraid” than to actually dispel the fear. It is easier to say “Stand firm” than to do it, when your internal fight-or-flight response is raging. But it is only when you can quell the fear and stand firm that you will be able - that you will even be around to see the deliverance of God. And when there is a crisis, when you can see no human help, then God is most obviously present.

The same situation occurred in the storm-tossed boat that the disciples and Jesus were in. The disciples were in a panic. The more experienced sailors among them knew a crisis when they encountered one, and this was a really dangerous situation, the water was deluging the open boat, and they could not hope to bail it out. They knew that they really could go down and all perish in the stormy waters. And Jesus was asleep! When you are filled with panic, it can be infuriating to see someone else who is calm in the crisis. Of course, Jesus didn't know there was a crisis, he was, as we said, asleep. So, they woke him up. They woke him, not so much, it seems with the idea of asking for help, as just so that he would share their panic.

And Jesus calms the storm, the storm without, and so the storm within. In the same way that God parts the waters and makes a way for the Israelites to escape their pursuers, changing the situation in a radical way, so Jesus changes the situation on the lake. The disciples are amazed: there was a crisis and God was obviously present.

Moses called God into the situation, the disciples called God's Son in, and that made all the difference. And from the days of Moses and even more from the days of Jesus' ministry, people have discovered that this is what happens. People in their personal lives, and churches and other groups of faithful people have discovered that when there is a crisis and they call God into the situation – even if they call in frustration and fear, rather than thought-through faith – God changes the situation.

One of the worst feelings that people in crisis have, is that no one can do anything. The train-lines are heading to the edge of a cliff and there is no breaking system, and disaster is unavoidable; there is no help, no one can do anything. But when you call God into the situation, when you call out to God, invoke his name, then you have already changed what is going on. When you call out to God you are reminded, you remind yourself, that the situation is not what you thought, because God is with you.

Sometimes God will do the dramatic and impossible, he will still the storm, he will part the floods. He will bring the stranger out of nowhere when you are lost in the fog, or when your car has run into a ditch on a deserted road in the dark. Sometimes just knowing that God is with you is enough to help you be calm, to stand firm, as Moses told the people, and watch for God's deliverance, for God's way out. If you think about Jesus' ministry as recorded in the Gospels, he was the one who changed crisis situation after crisis situation. He fed the 5000, he calmed the storm, as we have read, he raised Lazarus and Jairus' daughter, he healed the many sick who were brought to him, for each one of whom their illness was an insoluble problem. When Jesus was brought into a situation – and he nearly always was *brought* in, he didn't force his way in – then things changed.

I have been following a little of the General Assembly's debates this week, and in what I have heard said and in the papers that were presented, there is a real feeling of the Church of Scotland being in crisis – some of us might say “Finally, finally

people are waking up to see the reality and urgency of our situation.” In the Highland presbyteries we have known this for a long time, as the shortage of ministers, and aging of the church population has hit Highland congregations hardest for longest. In company with some 70 other congregations over Scotland, we have not waited for the whole church to come up with an answer to the crisis, but we have stepped out in faith on a path of renewal that means change.

We will only know how to change and what changes to make when we remember that God walks this path with us, when we actively study his word to hear his voice and call him into the life of our community. It is mainly due to the crisis in the whole Church of Scotland that we are making the administrative changes that will take us into Union with Laggan/St. Bride’s, and then possibly into linkage with Kingussie. But it is because of the crisis of how we live and express our faith that we are walking the path of renewal. We need to be renewed in God’s service, to learn to do things differently, not because what we are doing is wrong, but because it no longer is the best way of showing God’s love to our neighbours.

When we come together on a Sunday, we are those who at least have an interest in giving God worship and leaning from him. But what we do the rest of the time, is how we show the love of God which we learn and feel in worship to the world outside the church. That used to be done through organisations, Sunday School, Guild, maybe Boys and Girls Brigade or church-based Scouts and Guides, but increasingly everywhere, and here in particular, these ways have stopped working. There is a reason the Guild folded, that the Sunday School is much smaller than many of you remember and so on. That reason is because the world outside the church changed, and the church almost failed to notice, or if it did notice it was to lament and not to ask how we should then change to accomplish God’s purpose for us. There was a crisis, but we failed to call God into the boat, or to complain to him and then stand to watch how he would answer.

The Church, nationally and locally, doesn’t like to admit when we have a crisis. Sometimes I feel that my job is to put a good face on every set-back. We like to give the impression that we are a ship sailing calmly onwards over a sunlit ocean, which is mill-pond smooth. But that is not the case. And we should not be afraid. The ship of the church cannot and should not always be on an even keel, because if we are, that means that we are not where we are needed in the world. God’s people are needed where the seas are rough, where there is disaster or impending disaster, and the challenges of being in such places will show us our weak places. There are crises for the church to face, crises of purpose and identity, crises of how we fulfil our remit in a changing world. But we need not fear the crises. God is with us. God is with us, and as we remember that, remember it in a way that dominates our thinking, then we will find that path through the flooding water, and we will know the storm around us stilled. And God’s people will show the world what it means to face a crises with faith in our heavenly Father to be with us. Amen.

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