



The Third Sunday after Trinity
21 June 2015

Two Kinds of Fear

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Job 38.1-11; 2 Corinthians 6.1-13; Mark 4.35-end

I want to suggest to you that the seven short verses of today's gospel reading contain the heart of the challenge of Christianity to the earliest Christians, to the church today, and perhaps also to you, sitting in a pew this Sunday morning.

Let's start with the earliest Christians. Our story's set beside the sea. We're told it was evening. Somehow the clarity and vision of the day was fading. It was getting hard to remember what the gospel was all about. Jesus said, 'Let's go across to the other side.' The other side of Galilee was Gentile land. Jesus is telling the disciples it's time to go from what they know and understand and are good at and have more or less taped to a place where they're a minority, out of their depth, where their skills are useless and they have no racial privilege or social status. They're all in a boat, a conventional image of the church. But it says other boats were with Jesus. I wonder who was in the other boats. You mean Jesus wanted people close to him other than people like us? We don't know where we're going and we don't know all the people Jesus is bringing with us. This is getting scarier and scarier. I thought the church was supposed to be a safe space where we wouldn't have to encounter hostility, difference, or rivalry. Where it was just me and Jesus and people like Jesus and me. It's already bad enough, he's already shoved the tax collector and the fishermen into the same boat. I don't like the sound of these other boats, and I really don't like the sound of these people on the other side of the sea.

If boat means church, sea means chaos. God parts the waters in creation, and Moses parts the waters of the Red Sea at the exodus. The two foundational Old Testament stories are about God overcoming the chaos of existence and the tyranny of slavery. Suddenly the disciples are in the midst of a storm, and that sovereignty of God is in jeopardy. Crossing over to the other side, the early church wonders if this Jesus on their boat is any use in the face of the chaos of life or the tyranny of oppression.

It turns out Jesus is asleep. And this is the crucial moment. Asleep. How can God be asleep? Is this a sign that when it comes to the crisis God really is a benign but powerless symbol of anodyne goodwill? Or is it an indication that the almighty God could act on our behalf in the face of the shortcomings of creation or the cruelties of oppression but simply can't be bothered? Or is it that this whole God business was a fantasy, some kind of childish transitional object to prevent us facing up to the profound, ultimate and utter chaos of our lives?

There's a precedent for someone being asleep on a boat facing the chaos of a storm at sea. The prophet Jonah, fleeing his vocation, was roused from sleep and eventually spent three days in the belly of a whale, an event the disciples came to see as precedent for Jesus' three days in the tomb. Maybe this sleep isn't about God's absence, absentmindedness or carelessness. Maybe it's the prologue to something revelatory.

Jesus takes on the mantle of the creator God and the liberator Moses and dispatches the chaos of the storm with a sweep of the hand. 'Peace; be still.' Without question, he is the one with whom we can face all the challenges of our created existence, and all the threats that come to us from one another: he is the creator and the liberator; he is the one with whom we can face the storm and walk

into the unknown. If he challenges us to face something we think is beyond us, to proceed via a way that seems blocked, to keep trying in spite of disappointment and setback, to learn a new skill or make a new relationship when we thought those days were gone, who are we to say we can't. He is with us. The storm can attack us, can put the wind up us, can confuse and dismay us. But if we're on board his boat, the storm cannot overcome us.

Then he asks us, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' Good question. Why are the disciples afraid? Are they afraid that Jesus doesn't care, isn't strong enough, or is ultimately a fantasy? Did they lose confidence for a moment or was there a deep-seated lack of trust, lack of faith that surfaced in disagreement about crossing to the other side and exploded when the storm crashed in? Is this a prefigurement of the disciples all fleeing on Jesus' arrest? Whatever Jesus says or does, will the church find objections or bolt when the storm threatens? Deep down, do we all really believe chaos wins – or at least press the panic button when Jesus says 'Let's go across to the other side'?

But that's not the end of the story. One fear is replaced by another. Moments after saying, 'Can Jesus do anything?' the church is saying, 'What can't he do? Who then is this?' The story's about moving from the ungodly fear of living without God to the godly fear of living with God. From being terrified in the face of chaos the disciples are awestruck in the face of Jesus. And that's the journey of faith.

Let's fast-forward to the church today. It's evening. The church in this country seems to have got the idea that the heat of the day, whether that was a century or half a century ago, has passed. And now Jesus is saying, 'Let's go across to the other side' – the other side, where being a Christian is a minority pursuit, where we find ourselves out of fashion, associated with prejudice and small-mindedness, having to face up to our imperialist, abusive and discriminatory past, finding ourselves no longer able to rely on historic resources to tide us through difficult times, appreciating that religion is no longer regarded as the source of all wisdom but widely assumed to be the cause of all conflict. Of course we're reluctant to take up Jesus' invitation to go across to the other side.

And we're pretty nervous of the other boats. Half the time we're apologising for the other Christians. We're enlightened, inclusive, receptive, progressive, non-judgemental and equal access. But that lot; sorry about them. We'd privately prefer if there weren't other boats. It would be so much easier and nicer if all Christians were just like us. Sometimes Jesus is a very poor judge of character.

And the great windstorm arises. For some of us, it's all about creation: God is the animating force of all things and Jesus rescues us from the peril of death. For others of us, it's all about liberation: God dismantles the powers that oppress us and Jesus forgives us our sins. But in the midst of the storm we need something more immediate, more tangible. Jesus is asleep! And the church today faces the same quandary the early church faced: is God absent, careless, or powerless? Which is worse? Why are we afraid?

Why *are* we afraid? Because if we were faithful there would be no storm? But if Jesus is in the boat, who cares? Because the boat is in pretty bad shape and one of these days a storm is going to destroy it altogether? Because deep down we wonder if the boat is a fantasy and that the chaos of the storm is all there is? Or maybe simply because we don't fancy the challenges that await us if we go across to the other side.

The church's ungodly fear of being without God is about to be replaced by a godly fear of being with God. Recrimination and complaint is, in the end, a more comfortable and accommodating state of mind than awe and amazement. Do we fear that if the church grows smaller God gets smaller too? Surely the smaller the church gets the more amazing is the way God works even through this tiny

remnant of and makes it Christ's body. Where is our faith? Did it used to lie in our size and resources and social influence? If so, was that really faith, or an insurance policy – a boat with high sides, thick skin and good lifeboats? Losing those things is scary, but isn't it making us more faithful? Maybe our faith now is closer to where it ought to have been all along. Our fear at the storm is turning into a godly fear at the wonder of God.

Let's turn finally to ourselves. I wonder where you are in this story. Maybe Jesus is calling you to go across to the other side; like the disciples, to leave the western shore of Galilee, where your skills are valued, your face is known, your eccentricities accepted, your privilege secure, your status guaranteed, your identity established – maybe Jesus is inviting you to go across to the other side, where you can't hide behind these safe barriers, where your faith makes you a stranger and your achievements count for nothing, where you're in the minority learning new ways amid different norms.

There's a great storm. Things don't turn out smoothly. It wasn't supposed to be like this. The relationship is fragile, the promised job didn't transpire, the house fell through, the course was really hard, your health let you down, you were deceived or betrayed or disappointed or abandoned. And Jesus was asleep. Was it all an absurd fantasy, an impossible hope, or a cruel joke?

Here's the crucial moment. Why are you afraid? There's lots of potential reasons. But what's the real one, at the heart of it all? Are you afraid because your whole identity is staked on Jesus, and right now, in the midst of the storm, he seems to have nodded off? Or are you afraid because you haven't really pinned much of your identity to Jesus, and yet right now, you're in the midst of a mighty storm, and you suddenly feel he seems to be the only kind of salvation and liberation that can possibly help? Here's the defining point of our lives. Have we always hoped for an existence where we're accepted and secure and established and safe – or are we in the boat with Jesus, crossing to who knows where, with no certainty if we're equipped for anything that lies ahead, facing a storm and with a creeping sense that Jesus isn't simply here to snap his fingers and sort it all out for us?

Where is our faith? In the security we've achieved for ourselves, or in the companionship of Christ and the gift of the other boats and the challenge of the far shore?

There's a lot to be frightened of. But it might just turn out that what we spend most of our time being afraid of is the wrong thing. We're frightened of the far shore. We're frightened of the storm. We're frightened of Jesus being asleep. But what if we really saw what God can do, what God will do, who God truly is? Who *is* this? What would life be like if our fear at life without God truly were dwarfed by our awe at life with God?