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| Sunday 24th June 2012 St Bartholomew's, Grahamstown 9 a.m. | | 12th Sunday of the Year B Admission of Church Officers | |
| 2 Sam 5:1-12 | Ps 48 | 2 Cor 5:18-6:2 | |
| | | Mark 4:35-41 | |
| The still point of the storm | | | |

Jesus said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”
(Mk 4:40)

Greetings from the Cathedral family. Thank you in absentia to Eric Kelly and Jean; to churchwardens and PCC, to lay ministers; to all at St Bart’s. May God bless and guide you.

We are gathered here as the people of God, because in some way we have responded to the call of God in our hearts and lives. We believe. We have put our faith and trust in God and in His Son Jesus Christ. But to have faith in God can lead to all sorts of questions. The Gospel reading, the stilling of the storm, asks some of these questions and points us to answers.

The stilling of the storm

The early chapters of Mark’s Gospel consist of a series of miracles and teaching. Jesus comes to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand. His teaching and his works of power are signs of the kingdom, the rule of God. As we read the Gospel, we are confronted again and again with questions about Jesus: Who is this? Who is this who teaches with such authority? Who is this, that he can forgive sins? Who is this, with authority over demons? Who is this, that the sick are healed? Who is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him? Until, in Mark chapter 8, the question is put to the disciples, and to us: “who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29).

In today's Gospel, the disciples set out with Jesus in an open boat, to cross the sea or lake of Galilee. Visitors to those parts tell us that the weather is calm one moment, and sudden storms and massive waves the next – which is what must have happened in our reading. The boat in which Jesus and his disciples were travelling was being flooded by the waves. But Jesus was asleep. The fear and frustration of the disciples is understandable. “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mk 4:38). Jesus woke up, “rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.” (4:39)

The story is not only about danger and rescue. It has echoes from the Old Testament of the creator God; the stories of creation, when God's order, God's new world, emerged from the sea. The Israelites, fleeing from the Egyptian army, find that God has the power to make a pathway for them through the Red Sea. The prophet Jonah ran away from God and ended up in a storm, which was only calmed when the sailors threw him overboard. The response of the sailors, when they saw that the storm had stopped, sounds familiar: “they feared the Lord even more.” (Jonah 1:16). The psalms speak of the creator God who rules the raging of the sea, commanding it to calm down (e.g Ps 65:7; 89:9). In books such as Daniel, the sea is where the monsters come from.

The sea symbolises the dark power of evil and chaos, which threatens to destroy God's good creation, God's people, God's purposes.

So when Jesus calms the storm and rescues the disciples from danger, they and we are being shown that God's kingdom is at hand, that God's sovereign power is at work, the same power that made the world in the first place. The power of God is now in Jesus, and moving through him, to defeat the forces of sin and sickness, of chaos and evil.

Do you not care?

Our Gospel reading has a series of key questions. The disciples ask their first question at the start of the crisis: “Do you not care that we are perishing?” Their second question is at the end of it all: “Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” It is a question directed at one another, and at us, the onlookers, the listeners, the readers. “Who is this?” And Jesus asks two questions of the disciples, and of us: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

But it is the first question asked by the disciples, that is often our question, our struggle, as well. “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

When we face the chaos of our lives, of the world around us, we ask and at times rage against God: “Do you not care that we are perishing? Do you not care? Are you listening? Are you asleep? Is anyone there?” There are times when we are helpless, overwhelmed by circumstances, events beyond our control.

As much as we believe, we also doubt, and question, and wonder why things are going wrong, why doors remain closed, or situations of despair do not shift, why there seems no light at the end of the tunnel. There is no instant answer, no moment when God suddenly wakes up and calms the chaos. The desert remains bleak and featureless, the dry bones do not come to life, the storm rages on, our boat continues to sink. And there is no easy answer or quick fix.

No wonder, therefore, that even as we believe, and have faith, and trust, we can identify with the disciples in their cry: “Do you not care that we are perishing?”

Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?

It is in response to their cry and ours, that Jesus says, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” He calls us to the place of trust.

God's agenda for the world, for us, says Archbishop Rowan Williams, is peace, praise, and reconciliation. "For he is our peace" (Eph 2:14) and through the reconciling work of Christ we have peace with one another. We are made to "live for the praise of his glory." (Eph 1:12). We are brought into this place of peace and praise, we are reconciled with God, through his Son Jesus Christ: "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." (2 Cor 5:19). Our OT reading describes the covenant – the agreement between King David and the people of Israel – which reminds us of the covenant, the relationship between God and his people.

And so we believe, and we trust. We trust because God is the maker of heaven and earth. We trust because God's perfect will for us is peace, praise, and reconciliation. We believe in God the Father *Almighty*, a word which means the "ruler of everything", the "holder of everything". We believe and trust, not because this leads to instant solutions, but because it means that nowhere is God "absent, powerless, or irrelevant; [there is] no situation in the universe in the face of which God is at a loss.... [in other words] there is no situation in which God is not to be relied upon."¹

We trust, not because we can snap our fingers and God will put things right – it doesn't work that way. Rather, we trust, knowing that "God always has the capacity to do something fresh and different, to bring something new out of a situation"².

I hope I am not alone when I experience anger and anguish and struggle in my relationship with God. Sometimes very little makes sense except returning to the place of stillness, looking to Jesus in the midst of the storm. The image of Jesus asleep, stillness in the midst of the storm, is not an image of an uncaring God, but the image of perfect trust.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 16

² Williams, 16

Rowan Williams tells the story of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who was in her early twenties when the Germans invaded Holland. She was not a pious person, she had no explicit religious commitment. Yet in those few years before she was to die in the gas chambers in Auschwitz, she became more and more conscious of God's hand on her life. She wrote, "there must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?" She felt that her calling was "to occupy a certain place in the world, a place where others could somehow connect with God through her" – and this, says Rowan Williams, was "not in any self-congratulatory spirit or with any sense of being exceptionally holy or virtuous, but simply because she had agreed to take responsibility for God's believability."³

To believe and trust when the storm is raging, when we are in danger from every side, when the world is falling apart, when evil has the upper hand, to take responsibility for God's believability: that is our calling. Sometimes we need help to make sense of what is happening, to discern God's presence. And our calling is to help others make sense and find Jesus in the boat with them, in the midst of the storm. We know, at a very deep level, that we need not be afraid. In response to the cries and questions of others around us, our lived-out, mostly unspoken answer is "why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

So the questions in the Gospel reading invite us to bring our fear and anger to the Lord; but also to recognise our calling to take responsibility for God's believability; to be in that place of stillness in the midst of the storm, to live a life of faith and trust, prayer and worship, knowing that God, the Lord of all creation, has overcome the powers of sin and evil and death.

CONCLUSION

May we put our trust and faith in the Lord.

³ Williams, 22-23