

Jesus asleep during the storm on the lake

Mark 4.35-41

³⁵When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let us go across to the other side.' ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' ⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

Sermon preached at Old Alresford and Bighton Trinity 3 2021

Mk 4: ³⁵When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let us go across to the other side (of the lake)

For any visitor or pilgrim to the Holy Land time spent in a boat on the Sea of Galilee has to be a high point. Usually, when you get some distance out onto the lake the captain cuts the engine and you simply float quietly in company with others, reflecting on the silence. It may well be a calm day with scarcely a ripple on the Lake so that you are hard put to it to imagine a storm.

*But the lake is surrounded by hills, not least the Golan Heights. When a wind comes off the land it funnels down onto the lake and the water has nowhere to go except to pile up into steep waves. Storms are sudden and they are violent. Matthew's account of this event calls it a "seismos" and you don't have to know Greek to know what that means – earthquakes and volcanoes. It sounds like the end of the world.

*For the disciples the lake was a place of work, for several of them were fishermen, but it was also a place of fear. Especially in Mark's Gospel it is seen as the place where demons lurk and for much of the time Jesus and the disciples are to be found between this devilish place and the real world – on the edge of the lake or the beach.

*But today's Gospel tells us something else. Even if the waters represented chaos at the start of the creation story, God tamed them into order. So Jesus is confident enough that this is God's creation that he goes to sleep on the lake even while a storm is raging. By commanding the storm to cease he makes this very point in spectacular fashion.

Many people are faced, at this time, with an insuperable problem – how to avoid the Euros on their tvs! If you are tech-savvy you can, of course, stream what you watch on the wonder screen. I have at last discovered that it is useless giving DVDs to my grandchildren because they don't watch DVDs. Alternatively you can watch what they call Terrestrial television – which being translated means TV about the earth, usually a disaster movie. People love a disaster movie – until it begins to look too much like reality.

*I am told on good authority that there have been two excellent David Attenborough presentations in the last 24 hours. I am not sure where you will find them because I have been reading his “A life on our planet”. It is a spectacular book: only 220 pages long, but spelling out very carefully the disaster that is unfolding on us, pulling no punches, and yet giving us plenty of examples of ways in which, even at this late hour, we can turn the crisis around. It should be compulsive reading.

*So, I want to ask this morning, what is the storm that is currently stirring up our lake and making disaster movies look like – well, movies? What is the event in our world that, at this moment, makes us anxious about what is happening?

* When asked that question recently the Speaker of the House of Commons said it was the Virus. I think he is wrong. I think that the virus has been a distraction. There is no vaccination that can inoculate us against global warming. Global warming has the potential to kill all life on earth without partiality. I think it is our seismos, and I think it is theological.

Our Sunday readings in church at this time of year are featuring the story of David, son of Jesse. In the Old Testament reading last week we learned how Samuel anointed David King of Israel, in succession to King Saul. This week we hear the story of David's great duel with Goliath.

*It is a significant turning point. Until now the Philistines have dominated Israel in their own land. They have subdued them, they have refused them even farm implements in case they could be used as weapons. It has been a miserable time. They are a nation who have usually had charismatic leaders at a time of crisis. So this story about David is laying down a new phase in the history of the heroes of Israel. We shall hear a lot about his victories against the Philistines, until the Philistines are all gone.

*If we are going to confront the crisis that is coming upon us, we too need a charismatic leader who can speak with authority on the facts, whose heart is in conservation of a world we have known, and who is realistic enough not to underrate the challenge he will face. We need a focal point or focal person to inspire us all to face up to this crisis. At a time such as this even those who love watching disaster movies would prefer not to see what is happening.

*So we have ended up with a slightly surreal situation. We have ended up with a popularly acclaimed but unelected charismatic leader who is as old as King David is young. But he has put his years to good use and he has an excellent working knowledge of situations, of pioneers and of the whole planet wide picture. Furthermore, in David Attenborough we have someone who is able to remain optimistic in spite of the story he has had to tell.

I realise with something of a shock that this month I am likely to drive more than 1000 miles in the month for the first time since February 2020 – 16 months ago. In some ways Covid has taught us all to live a less complex life, perhaps to stay more local, to think twice before setting out for distant horizons. It has given us back some simplicity in our lives. I am reminded of the tag line : we must live more simply so that others may simply live.

*Of course, we can always point the finger at the real miscreants in our world, at China or India and the continuing use of fossil fuels. Or we can point the finger at President Bolsonaro in Brazil who seems to be in denial of all things that are important. But what matters is not so much apportioning blame, but moving people to action. There is an urgent agenda waiting.

*All of us have a part of play in the kind of revolution that needs to happen if this planet is to remain alive. And we can all make a difference. But we have to be prepared to make great changes: in how we travel, how we eat and drink, how we take our leisure, how we quantify contentment. A change in culture is always more challenging than any other kind of change and we have been following a certain trajectory ever since the industrial revolution. We are used to thinking in a certain way.

*Time is very short – Attenborough lays it out with brutal honesty – but he is not a purveyor of doom. He explains what steps can be taken to redeem the situation, from re-wilding the landscape to underwater farming of kelp, from re-plenishing fish stocks to learning to farm vertically so that we take up less land. If we take up the challenge a better life awaits us. Its either death – or a better life for all. There are no other options. Time is very short

The story of Jesus asleep in the boat on the lake rang bells with Mark's generation. They were the first Christians to face persecution by the Roman authorities and they saw that as a storm on the lake, and the church as the boat. The important point was that Jesus was with them. This is a theological issue.

*Of course, people don't want to talk about climate change – it is such a vast and daunting subject. But some of us, who used to meet at Old Alresford Place for communion on a Thursday morning, now meet on line twice a month to discuss. During the last year we have been discussing a book by Pope Francis called "Let us dream". It is a very positive book, published in the face of Covid, and it raises a lot of issues.

*So we are now discussing some of those issues which include, the difference we can make individually to global warming, the David Attenborough book on Life on our Planet, Economics once further growth becomes impossible, our lifestyle, the response of the church in "The Humble Church" and learning to value our locality in a book called "Parish". We do this in order to see how best we can put our declining years behind the change that is going to be needed.

*In this morning's story Jesus decides to cross the lake. He is not forced to. His going to sleep shows that he is prepared to place himself in danger in the belief that this is God's world. If, alongside the Gospels, we read the creation story in Genesis and reflect on it, we will see why this is a theological issue – why the rising waters threaten to overturn the order of creation. As followers of Jesus we are invited to be fearless in our discovery of the truth, believers in what is possible and in God's good purposes, and committed to the well-being of all who share the creation with us.