

Sermon for Sunday 23 June 2024

4th after Trinity

1 Samuel 17: 57 – 18: 5, 10 – 16; 2 Corinthians 6: 1 – 13; Mark 4: 35 – end

Rough Seas with Jesus

Many years ago, on a holiday in Scotland, our B & B landlady offered us the use of her rowing boat on Loch Awe. Simon was very keen to take this up. So one day we found the boat, and Simon rowed out across the loch. I happened to know, because I'd been reading my guide book, that Loch Awe is a particularly deep loch. And the rowing boat was very small. It was one of those boats where you feel very close to the water. It was absolutely flat calm, a lovely summer day. No sign of a storm. Nonetheless, the further we went from the shore the more apprehensive I became. I did trust Simon enough to get in the boat with him. But I didn't really feel comfortable until we got back to the shore!

In today's Gospel reading the disciples have good reason to be afraid. Jesus has just been

preaching, teaching and healing in and around Galilee. He's tired, and He knows His disciples also need a break from the crowds. So He suggests they get into a boat and put out for the other side of the lake, a Gentile area. The disciples obey without question. They do trust Him. Jesus goes to sleep in the boat. Very likely he was lying underneath the raised platform where the helmsman would have stood to steer the boat. The 'cushion' may have been a leather cushion or bag normally used to protect the helmsman's thigh from the wall of the boat. Mark is the only one of the Gospel writers to tell us that there were 'other boats' with them. So we can perhaps imagine a little flotilla setting out across the lake. And the rest of the story you know.

I've produced a picture for you to look at today. ¹It's an early painting by Rembrandt of this story. Sadly, the original was stolen in 1990 from a museum in the US, and its whereabouts is

¹ You will find this picture here -

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Storm_on_the_Sea_of_Galilee

unknown. Rembrandt's boat is not an authentic Galilee boat! But it looks like a pretty authentic storm!

I'll give you a few moments just to look at the picture. Where do you see yourself in the picture? Are you in the boat with Jesus, or in one of the other boats following beside? Or are you an onlooker, outside the story? What is going on?

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Here are some things that I've noticed about the picture.

I think the helmsman on the right may have given up trying to steer. Instead, he's looking towards Jesus. Three of the disciples have woken Jesus and are asking for help. One, clearly not a sailor, seems to be being sick over the side. Or perhaps he's baling. On the other side are the rest, who are frantically trying to get the sails down. These are the sailors, and they know what needs to happen – but the storm has blown up very quickly and unexpectedly, even snapping some of the rigging.

And then, there's the light. Jesus has spoken; his hand is raised. The clouds have parted and some blue sky is appearing. The light falls across the boat catching Jesus' face. One of the disciples, in the centre of the picture, has just turned. Has He just seen the light? Or is he still watching the frantic activity of the others?

How would we have reacted? How do we react when we face life's choppy seas?

Here is what one commentator has said about the meaning of this story.

“the boat is a symbol of the church, while the sea – especially the sea out of control – represents the world dominated by forces that are hostile to the church and seek to destroy it. Yet to fulfil its mission and win people (“fish”) for the Kingdom, the church must go out upon the sea that is the world. There are times in the history of the church when its Lord seems to be absent or asleep, times when faith in the divine presence and power is put to the test, times even when the forces of death do prevail and lead to martyrdom in the cause of faith and justice. The Lord who

rescued the disciples from death at sea will not always preserve the faithful from death – just as the Father did not preserve the Son from death, but raised him from the dead when his “obedience unto death” had run its course (Phil 2: 8 – 9). The story calls those who place themselves “in the boat” with Jesus to faith in the God who saves through and beyond death but not necessarily from it.”²

Amen

If we get into the boat with Jesus, we’re not guaranteed an easy passage through life. There will still be dangers and storms. St Paul, writing in our second reading today, had certainly experienced this, and none of us is immune from the darkness and dangers of our world. To keep going will sometimes take more faith than we think we have. But Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” (Hebrews 12:2), who even the winds and the waves obey, has gone before us. He will preserve our souls and bring us to new life in his kingdom.

² *A Costly Freedom* – Brendan Byrne, p94