

## Trinity 2 21<sup>st</sup> June 2009

*Job 38 :1-11; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-end*

‘Why are you so cowardly? Don’t you have faith yet?’ I said in preaching a few Sundays ago that there are some who would perhaps regard God’s only useful purpose – if he exists at all – to be to ‘look after us’. Even if we don’t give him a second thought, at least he can be our safety net – when all else fails, a kind of supernatural task force that can swoop to our rescue. But experience reminds us, all too often, that disaster and tragedy can fall upon unbelievers and believers alike. So we’d be naïve to see in today’s Gospel, and particularly in Jesus’ reprimand to his disciples at the end, from which I just quoted, a general assumption that in any situation he will restore calm and bring us to a safe haven.

In fact, the tone of that reprimand as we hear it in Mark’s Gospel, is not fatherly and reassuring, but rather abrupt and impatient. When Jesus tells his disciples to ‘have faith’, he’s referring to a whole way of being, not just trust that he will keep them safe. In John’s Gospel we hear Jesus encapsulate this in the great statement he makes: ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life’. When he taught them to pray in the words we call ‘The Lord’s Prayer’, their priority was to be, first, adoration and worship – ‘hallowed be thy name’, and then, to align themselves to his will and the coming of his kingdom – ‘thy kingdom come; thy will be done’. Only later were they to ask ‘do not bring us to the time of trial’, or testing, or temptation, and to be delivered from evil.

Note that the disciples were only on the waters facing this peril in response to Jesus’ lead at the beginning of the story – ‘Let us go across to the other side’; he got them in that mess in the first place! Oh dear, are we going to end up arguing our way *out* of following Jesus, because it only seems to lead to more trouble and turbulence? This picture certainly flies in the face of how some people like to use religion – as a therapeutic retreat from stress and strain, inducing unrelenting tranquillity and calm, a kind of holy ‘trip’. But Jesus says in John’s Gospel, ‘I am come that they may have life, and have it in abundance’ [John 10:10], and if we take up that offer, it does come with attendant challenges. Elsewhere in the Gospels there’s a graphic illustration of this, where the disciples are returning tiredly to the shore having been out at sea fishing all night, and having caught nothing. Seeing them, Jesus tells them to cast their nets over the side of the boat right where they are, and, although doubtful, they do as he says. They strike lucky, and that could be the happy end of the story – one with a neat moral: ‘follow Jesus, and all will be hunky-dory’. But it isn’t quite as simple as that. Their catch of fish is *so* successful that the nets start to break, and the boats start to sink. At least before, they were self-made men, keeping their dignity, even if they were peeved at having no success for one night. All of a sudden, though, just as they have success beyond their imagining, dignity goes out of the window as they lose control, and have to accept help from others; the whole scene becomes almost slapstick.

Some commentators have actually seen, in the story of Jesus calming the wind and the sea, the Gospel writer addressing problems of current persecution being faced by the later Christian congregation he was writing for. Whether or not there is anything in this, and

even if 'Mark' is recounting this incident with local problems in mind, I believe it is one that very likely made a deep impression on the original disciples, causing them to wonder yet again at just who this man Jesus was. Squalls like this are apparently common on Lake Galilee, but the experience of being tested to their limits and yet seeing the turbulence brought under submission by Jesus would have been just one of many glimpses they caught of how this living faith he was teaching them about could work out in practice after his death and resurrection. His annoyance at being woken from sleep possibly arises from his wishing them already to have that prayerful faith in God's provision that didn't depend on his being physically present.

'Abundance of living' in the life of faith for us, now, will come as we attend to the guidance and prompting of the Holy Spirit, and are willing to be drawn into the *adventure* of discipleship, not settling for a 'quiet life' of our own making. As we respond, however falteringly, to Christ in this way, we may be taken away from what is familiar and comfortable, or we may even at times feel swamped by the sheer breadth and immensity of new possibilities, wondering if we can possibly live up to them. It is then that we can remind ourselves just where these possibilities and this abundance originate in the first place, and have faith that the one who called us remains at our side, saying 'Peace, be still'.

*Paul Nicholson*