

## **Stilling the storm – Sarah Penfold**

### **Mark 4: 35-41, 20/06/21**

Usually when I hear this gospel story in this building Gill Gough and I are knee deep in 4 and 5 year olds from Kingswood school. Until Covid struck they were coming to see us every fortnight and we would tell them a Bible story. This is one of their favourites.

Of course, for this story you really need a boat. The children would collect as many kneelers as they could and we would arrange them in a boat shape in front of the altar. Whoever was telling the story would sit at the back of the boat and the children would sit along the sides. We would ask the teachers to pick a child to take the part of Jesus and that child would take a cushion and lie down at the front of the boat.

When the storm came, we would rock in the wind. Careful not to fall overboard or be seasick, until we woke Jesus and he would stand at the front of the boat, stretch out his hand, and we could all sit still and quiet again. When their teacher asked about the story there were always plenty of hands waving in the air to tell us about building the boat, and about being scared by the storm until Jesus made the wind and the waves go away. Children love that feeling of being scared when they know all along that they are safe.

There are some details in Mark's telling of the story that it is worth taking note of. There were other boats with them – so not only the disciples were saved from the storm, other people were as well. The trip across the lake had been Jesus' suggestion and as is the way of human nature surely the disciples would therefore have blamed him for their predicament. 'If you hadn't suggested this we might all be in the dry at Peter's with a beaker of wine'.

It is perhaps worth remembering here that the majority of the disciples were Galilean fishermen. This was their lake. They understood its changes of mood. And still they were afraid. Very afraid. This storm was something out of the ordinary, sufficient for them to fear for their lives.

Now I don't suppose any of us are expecting to find ourselves in a small wooden boat on the sea of Galilee any time soon, possibly not on any sort of lake. (Although Andy Guy has been known to do scary things in a rowing boat on Lake Windermere). And even if we did, we would be going as tourists whose trips could be cancelled if the weather was seriously in doubt.

Perhaps its time we stopped the literal interpretation of the story and thought a bit more about its wider meaning.

It was at Jesus instigation that they set out on what they thought was a pleasant evening sail across the lake. But he was asleep at the time that the storm began – apparently unaware of what was happening. Amazingly he remains asleep. But once awake he rebuked the wind and the waves and the sea is calm again.

There is some inconsistency in the story here. Jesus is in control of nature – he calms the storm just with a word – but he appears also to have been oblivious to its coming, happy to allow it to let the disciples fear for their lives. What if he was aware that the storm was coming but wanted them to understand that God is always in control? And remember they were not the only boat on the lake, there were others with them, he wanted them all to understand that God is always in control. And perhaps to see that God's love and care was for everyone, not just his special friends.

The storm rocked the disciples' boat – it was outside of the things they felt able to cope with. There is no one in Britain at present who has not felt that their boat has been rocked by the Covid

pandemic. At different times different groups will vociferously assert that Covid has been particularly hard for them because ..... Covid has been hard for everyone. The pandemic has been like the storm on the lake. Just when we were calmly sailing along the storm blew everything into chaos, and we were frightened, very frightened. This was not the fear induced by some adrenalin rich activity, bungee jumping or mountaineering. This was a fear that crept into our safe and ordinary lives. Covid crept into everything we knew and did. And often we have not known what we should fear.

So over the past year and a bit we have seen people with too much to do, too little to do, too many people to contact, too few. And all the time the realisation that the world is changing and will in some ways remain changed although we still don't really know what those changes will be.

The Kingswood children are happy to pretend to be frightened by a storm that they know is not real – they know that they are safe. The worst that can happen is that they fall off their kneeler and bump on the floor. The disciples were fearing for their lives, their futures. They turned to Jesus, their friend, and accused him of not caring about them and sleeping while they drowned. And he simply reminded them that they did not need to be afraid. They needed to have faith.

We know that life will throw many storms at us, mostly not as universal as Covid, but illness, disappointment and separation, they will all come our way. We know that we will be afraid for our present and for our futures. And afraid for our friends and families. But we don't need to be. We have Jesus to guide and hold us through the storms. Not every storm can be stilled with a word, but with Jesus the wind can feel less strong and the waves less high. Think of a tandem parachute jump. The novice can feel secure knowing that they are quite literally in the hands of an expert. They are still jumping out of a plane.

The Old Testament lectionary reading for today is from Job. In it God speaks to Job through a storm, he spoke to Isaiah through an earthquake, and in today's Gospel to the disciples through a storm. Whatever rages about us as long as we listen the voice of God, in some way or another, will be there to show the way to the calm waters beyond. We can feel the calm and take courage.

With Jesus as our guide, with our knowledge of his care for us, for our safety, we can take risks. Set out to new challenges without worrying about our own abilities. We can step forward into our futures with hope and confidence.