

The Stilling of the Storm: Mark 4:35-41 Sunday June 21st 2009 Robert Innes

Today is the summer solstice, the day in the year when we northern countries enjoy the longest hours of daylight. It is a beautiful time of the year with many of our plants in flower and the trees fully in leaf but before the higher temperatures of later summer. This weekend many of our younger people, are away together at the picturesque village of Chassepierre in the Ardennes. Last weekend I had the pleasure of being in Cambridge in England, preaching at my former college, where the lawns and the gardens were wonderfully beautiful.

So it is a happy co-incidence that our gospel reading today is a story about Jesus's interaction with the natural world. It's the well-known story of the stilling of the storm. I love Bible stories. I often look at a story that I think I know well, and discover in it some such deeper truth than I had ever noticed before. Today's passage is a very good example. It's a story most of us will have learnt when we were very young. It can be appreciated by the smallest child. And yet, as we shall see, in just five verses it takes us to introduces us to some of the deepest questions about human existence and divine action, questions which might well be relevant when we are thinking about God and creation today.

Let's first of all remind ourselves of the story. It is evening, and Jesus proposes to the disciples that they go over to the other side of the Lake. Capernaum in Galilee was Jesus home base and Jewish territory. The other side of the lake, some 8 miles away, is the region of the Gerasenes. Over on that side, there are more Gentiles, with their – to a Jew disgusting - Gentile practices like keeping pigs. So crossing the lake is symbolically important; it means going into foreign territory.

As the crossing proceeds the weather changes. Lake Galilee is an idyllic, peaceful place. But it is in a gorge surrounded by hills, and strong winds can easily and quickly funnel into the gorge whipping up the lake. And that's precisely what happens that evening. A great windstorm comes down, maybe from the Golan heights, and lashes up the water's surface. Waves begin to break over the side of boat. Very quickly the boat starts to fill up with water so that it is nearly swamped. At least some of the disciples are experienced fishermen. But the situation is becoming critical. Meanwhile where is Jesus? Unbelievably, he is fast asleep curled up on a cushion in the back of the boat. The disciples wake him up. "Teacher", they say, "don't you care that we are perishing." Jesus gets up rebukes the wind and commands the waters to be still. The great storm is replaced by a great calm.

What does the story mean? Well you could, and people often have, taken it as a kind of allegory. The windstorm represents the storms of life. The boat represents the church. The presence of Jesus brings peace. When his followers call out to him, Jesus soothes the storms of life and replaces them with his calm. Jesus is our friend in time of need and all we have to do is call out to him and he gives us his comfort and his peace amidst the stresses and strains of life. That would be one way of interpreting the story. And whilst that wouldn't be entirely wrong, it wouldn't be entirely right. Because it is not actually what the story says.

You see, if we read on to the last verse of the story, we find that whilst the great storm is replaced by a great calm the effect on the disciples is *not* to give them 'peace' but to

give them a 'great fear'. "Great storm, great calm, great fear." "Who is this?", ask the disciples, "that even the wind and waves obey him?" "who is this? What kind of a person are we dealing with here?"

Let me then suggest three things that the story is teaching us. They are concerned with the power of God, the mystery of God and the trustworthiness of God. The story is first of all a demonstration of God's power in Jesus over the forces of nature. In scripture the sea waters symbolise chaos. In Genesis, God begins his creative activity by separating water from water so bringing order out of chaos. According to the psalmist God alone can control the waters of the surging sea. In stilling the storm, Jesus demonstrates divine authority and power over nature.

It's interesting to notice that the next two stories in Mark's gospel are also miracles demonstrating Jesus power: first over evil spirits - the story of the Gerasene swine, and then over sickness - the healing of Jairus's daughter. The three stories together show Jesus power to overcome the forces which threaten human life: natural disaster, evil and sickness. In each case, Jesus doesn't just 'manage' or negotiate with these forces: he overcomes them: "be quiet", be "still" he says to the storm. "Come out of this man", he says to the evil spirit; "be free from your suffering" he says to Jairus's daughter.

Now for all that we today have a good deal of control over our environment, and a lot more control than people did in Jesus day, it seems to me that our lives are, in certain respects, just as precarious as the lives of those disciples in the boat. We, like them, are at the mercy of forces which we can manage to a certain extent but which we cannot fully control. Climate change, terrorism and war, plagues and pandemics, these are the faces which natural disaster, evil and sickness present to us today. And we need just as much today as we ever did to be saved. The prayer Jesus gave us, "deliver us from evil", is every bit as relevant to us as it was to the first disciples.

There are some who believe God does not intervene in the world. They doubt that God can or will act on behalf of his friends. They don't believe in miracles. They find it impossible to belief that God might act against the so-called laws of nature. There are others who have experienced answered prayers. There are people who have seen extraordinary physical healings. Or who have known fruit from some project or activity far beyond the sum total of the human input. If we believe in God, then today's story invites us to reflect how, if at all we expect to see his power demonstrated in the world. If there is a God, then he is a source of great power: and indirectly or directly we would expect that power to be made known today, as it was in Jesus day.

My second point follows on from this, and is concerned with the mystery of God. The disciples say to Jesus "Teacher, don't you care if we perish?" The disciples have with them in the boat someone who can still the storm if he chooses; yet he simply lies there asleep. Why doesn't he act? Doesn't he care? Actually the disciples are honourable inheritors of a whole tradition of biblical writers who complain bitterly that God does not act. Psalm 44 "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep O God?" And most significantly: Job - who complains bitterly that God is deaf to his cries for help. And if we are honest, maybe we too share the disciples' indignation. Perhaps we too

have suffered personal misfortune or know good folk amongst our friends and family to whom bad things have happened, and God appears to be silent.

The answer given to Job formed our Old Testament reading today. It is a great and troubling text. I wonder how adequate an answer to Job you find it? What it says is that the immensity of God's power is matched by the immensity of God's mystery. The Lord answers Job out of the storm. And he says to him, "Just who do you think you are, little man?" What do you know about anything?" Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? "Have you ever given orders to the morning or shown the dawn its place?" Human life is caught up in a mystery which is beyond our human telling. Our attempts to rationalise God and to prescribe how he may and may not act will always founder upon God's unsearchable mystery. And if the storm is silenced by God's power, then Job would remind us that ultimately we are silenced by God's mystery.

Thirdly, whilst it is hard to hear it if you are in the middle of the storm, God is trustworthy. The disciples find Jesus scary, but Jesus is never malign. God is all-powerful but he is also all-loving. So it is that Jesus rebukes the disciples harshly because of their lack of trust. One of the greatest themes throughout the Bible is that of covenant – God's promise to act for good for his people. It is not accidental that of the many covenants in scripture, the first one is a covenant made to all the people of the earth through Noah, with the promise that God will never again destroy the whole earth through flooding. The last covenant, the new covenant, is the one sealed by Jesus death, this is the promise that though the world is a frightening place, God loves it so much that he will give his son to save it. God is trustworthy; you can believe in him.

The saving power of God, the unfathomable mystery of God, and the ultimate trustworthiness of God. These are some of the big themes that lie just below the surface of this apparently simple story about a storm on a lake. Well you may think I have made it all far too complicated. But I don't think so. Because as soon as you start to wonder how, if at all, God might intervene in our natural world then you have to start asking some big questions.

Last Saturday evening, whilst we were in Cambridge, Helen and I had the pleasure of attending a concert in the wonderful surroundings of King's College chapel. It was a magnificent occasion. The soloists were remarkable, the orchestra excellent and the conductor, Stephen Cleobury had just that day been given a knighthood by the Queen for his services to music. But it was the programme that particularly grabbed my attention. There were just two items. One was Beethoven's 9th symphony. That's a work best known for its tune "the ode to joy" which has become our European anthem. The other item, was a very different work. It was the world premiere of a specially commissioned piece by the composer Maxwell Davies. And it was based on a poem written specially for the 800th anniversary of the founding of Cambridge University. The poem is called "Lamentations". It has an ecological theme, and it describes in haunting prose the effects of climate change and global warming. The effect of the concert was to link together European culture and ideals on the one hand, with potential catastrophe on the other. And I was very struck that in a major anniversary year, a university which you might expect, in its end of year concert,

would be celebrating achievement, and youth and hope was instead expressing lamentation, foreboding and fear.

I began by thinking about midsummer and the beauty of creation at this lovely time of the year. Maxwell Davies's lamentations, describe a world from which much of this beauty will all too quickly vanish. It is a world without God, and a world without much hope. And I am left wondering whether does my belief in God and in Jesus make a difference?

And, surely, yes it does! We find in the stilling of the storm a God who is powerful and mysterious yet ultimately trustworthy. The psalmist in his bleaker moments raises the possibility that God might indeed be deaf to human calls for help, that God might indeed choose to hide himself for ever. But the Jesus in our story does wake up and he does rescue his disciples from the storm when they call to him for help.

So this story will have done its work if we, with the disciples, can hear Jesus rebuke: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" The disciples had good reason to be afraid, after all, it seemed they were about to drown. Yet Jesus encouraged them to move from fear to faith. We also may have many reasons to fear, at a personal, social or ecological level. And without God, there may be little hope. Yet we put our trust in him. It is from him that we draw strength to act in the present and to find hope in the future. As St. Paul says in our New Testament reading: "now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation."