

The stilling of the storm

Second Sunday before Lent 2019

‘Suddenly a gale swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up, shouting ‘Master, Master, we are perishing’.

This is not just a story about bad weather – although it is, of course, also about that.

Storms, raging waters, towering waves – in the Bible, this is the way everything which is absurd and terrible and chaotic in life is talked about. It’s good imagery: it catches the way in which our worlds are fragile – how things like accidents, failures, betrayals and disasters are likely to smash it all up without warning. Think of what it is like being Shamima Begum’s parents at the moment, contemplating the wreckage of your family. Or of being one of the bystanders when a Hellfire missile screeches in from the plain blue sky over Yemen: life shredded, literally so, in an instant.

Each one of us will have different, perhaps less dramatic moments in which the fragile boat of security and happiness has threatened to break apart – divorce, bereavement, sickness, betrayal, mental illness. These are just the usual suspects. Your storm might be different. What is certain – absolutely certain – is that it will come. After all, what is our own death but the one great storm through which we must pass, which threatens to undo everything, to rob everything of meaning and value?

All this is what the Bible is on about when it talks about seas and storms and floods. It is not just bad weather: it is our fragile world, so ready for engulfing.

‘And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm.’

Why did the early Christians revere Jesus as God? Because they experienced him as the one who did what God did: who took the old bible stories about God slaying the sea-monster and made them flesh here and now. Jesus was the one who could hold chaos in check, who would not allow the sea to overwhelm human life. That’s why when this story was told in the early churches, it ended with the rhetorical question, ‘Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?’ To the Christian Jewish mind the answer was self-evident: this must be Emmanuel, God with Us.

You might think, though, that there is an obvious question. It was all very well for the disciples: their boat was saved. But what of all the times when people cry ‘Master, Master we are perishing’, and to all intents and purposes Jesus appears to remain asleep? The missiles fly, the cancer grows, the flood rises. It would certainly be nice to believe in a God who holds back the powers of chaos, but we don’t seem to have one. We have one who pulled off some impressive tricks in Palestine two thousand years ago, and has been distinctly absent since.

That’s why it is important to be quite clear about what Christian faith does and doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean that storms will not come. Bad things will happen to us. Cancer, Alzheimers, strokes, betrayals,

desertions: the storms will break over us. They broke, after all, over Jesus: arrested, judged, killed. And when St. Luke told his story, he wrote for people who, no doubt, had passed through their own storms – had watched their loved ones suffer and die, and who would do so themselves. We'd be misreading the Gospel story for today if we thought it meant that at the last moment, God always acts and things turn out alright. That is not how Christianity works. We still have to go through our storms.

But there is a Gospel, and it is this. Because of Jesus, those storms have changed. In a world without Christ, the storms seem to be the truth of things. Everything we make of ourselves, all goodness and love and beauty are fragile things to be swept away in the flood. Macbeth puts it best in that scene pacing the battlements after the suicide of Lady Macbeth, surveying the wreckage of his life: 'out, out brief candle! Life is a poor tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' In the final analysis, that is what the world is without Christ. Storm wrecked, debris.

But the Gospel is that the world is not without Christ: that there is a stronger power in the world than all the sound and fury, a power which means life *can* signify something, that the love and beauty we make cannot be unmade, cannot be swept away. That is what the Resurrection of Christ means: that sin and death and hell rise up in one great storm to drown Christ, and where we go under, he goes through. He goes through, to come out the far side of the storm, not destroyed, but risen and glorified. And in doing so he makes a way for us to follow- as the prophet Isaiah says, he make the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over. We are safe to go into suffering and death because He will take us through. What once we could only fear as the end of everything becomes

the beginning of everything. The deadly threat of the storm has gone – to be replaced, if we can hear it, with an invitation: ‘where is your faith?’

‘Where is your faith?’ That voice speaks gently, not accusingly. My faith is, I suspect, a fairly weak thing. It has not been tested, much. I don’t know it will bear up under any of the storms that are waiting out there. I suppose that we never know the depth or reality of our own faith.

Thankfully, however, the truth is not dependent upon how strongly we believe it. The earth goes round the sun no matter how much I doubt it. Christ is there: safe, victorious, guarding and cherishing, no matter how much I fear. He spoke, and there was calm. Let that peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds now and forever.

Amen.

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