

20th June 2021 Sermon (Andrea Ward)

2 Corinthians 6:1-13 & Mark 4:35-41

I wonder if you've ever caught the shipping forecast on BBC4 radio? Some people love to listen to it, not because they need to know what the weather's going to be like out at sea, but because of its lyrical, rhythmic character. But, in the words of the Beeb itself, "To those whose work depends on the high seas, it can be a lifeline." Well, perhaps the disciples who sailed with Jesus that night across the Sea of Galilee might have appreciated a Radio 4 shipping forecast!

Jesus had spent the day teaching large crowds by the lake or Sea of Galilee. Perhaps he wanted to spend some "down" time alone with his disciples or he sensed it was time to minister in a different place, for come the evening, he proposed that they sailed across to the other side of the lake. Sailing in the evening would have been quite normal, as we know from some accounts in the gospels that some of those disciples who had been fishermen did their fishing by night. Nothing unusual in Jesus's suggestion, then.

But part way through their journey, the weather took a turn for the worse, and they were caught in a furious squall. Among the disciples in the boat were almost certainly several of the fishermen Jesus had called - Simon, Andrew, James, and John, men very used to storms on the lake. The fact that they were

afraid tells us that this was a very serious situation. The boat was being swamped with water; they feared for their lives. Anyone in their situation would have been anxious, fearful, scared for their lives.

I don't know how long they'd been bailing water out of the boat, but it would seem that the disciples had left it until things were absolutely desperate before going to Jesus with their situation. To be fair to them, up to this point in Mark's gospel, they'd seen Jesus miraculously heal people (many people) but there hadn't yet been any miracles like feeding of the 5000 or walking on water. Yes, Jesus was a Teacher and Healer, but they didn't necessarily think "Well, that means he can calm a raging storm".

But they certainly left it a long time before they went to find Jesus. I think we have that same tendency - that slowness to seek out the Lord with our problems and concerns, that tendency to go to others or to try and work things out on our own before finally turning to the Lord in prayer! Thankfully, he is always waiting, ready to listen when we've decided we're ready to talk! But we might spare ourselves some of our angst if we went to him sooner!

So, the disciples finally alerted Jesus. Where was he? What was he doing all this time? Sleeping in the stern. A picture of calm, enjoying blissful rest in the midst of the raging storm. To the disciples, it seemed that he wasn't bothered about what was happening to them: "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

There are times in our lives when it can feel like we're being swamped by our circumstances; there are things going on that are beyond our control, and it feels like we're going under, we're going to drown. In those times, we can feel really scared, fearful about what's going to happen, anxious about how we're going to carry on, how we're going to keep holding it all together. And when things aren't getting any better, we can wonder where Jesus is. Is he asleep? Does he care?

If you've ever felt like that, you're in good company, for it's a question we find in the prayers of the Old Testament, the Psalms.

Psalm 44:23-24:

"Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?

Rouse yourself! Do not reject us for ever.

²⁴ Why do you hide your face

and forget our misery and oppression?"

So, what was going on?

When they found Jesus asleep in the boat that stormy night, it wasn't because he was unconcerned or unaware about what was happening. His ability to rest so deeply in the midst of chaos was, I believe, because he trusted his Father in heaven so completely with his very life and with the lives of those who were with him. And this same Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, is neither asleep or unconcerned for us in the situations we face, today. As we're reminded in Psalm 121:2-4:

"My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot slip –

he who watches over you will not slumber;

⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel

will neither slumber nor sleep."

As we cry out to the Lord, he wants us to remember that there is no situation that we find ourselves in which he is not aware of; which he is not present in; and there is no situation we might find ourselves in that has him worried or anxious, at a loss to know how to help us. He is deeply *concerned* for us, but he is not afraid.

Because what this passage reminds us, is that there is nothing in heaven and earth which is outside of Christ's power and authority. Jesus, on being awakened by the disciples, got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Just three words and the storm was completely calmed. "Who is this?" the disciples asked, "Even the wind and the waves obey him!" They'd seen Jesus heal people, yes, but this was of a completely different order - this was the universe itself bowing to his command.

And why wouldn't the universe bow to his command when Jesus, as Hebrews 1 says, is the One who sustains all things by his powerful word. And as Paul tells us in Colossians 1: "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all

things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17) and again in John 1:3 "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." Why wouldn't the elements obey the command of their Maker and Creator? "Why are you so afraid?" Jesus asks, "Do you still have no faith?"

We may not always feel it, but the truth is that there is nothing we can face in our life, however overwhelming it may seem to us, that is beyond our Lord's ability to deal with. The Maker of heaven and earth has the authority and power to deliver us from any storm we might face, but as the one who also sustains all things by his powerful word, he also has the power to hold us and sustain us within the storm, to give us the strength that we need to endure in times of trouble.

But even if our earth's boat should capsize and we find ourselves going under, Jesus will be right there with us. I don't mean to make light of that - the thought of being in a sinking boat and of drowning is terrifying. But even if the worst *should* happen to me, no storm that I might ever face has the power to cast me out of the safety of the Lord's love and care. For nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I want to close by sharing something that happened early this week, which seemed to resonate with this account of Jesus and his disciples in the boat.

I was praying on Tuesday morning, when a sparrow flew very hard into the window, and as I looked up I saw it drop straight down. I went out to find it lying on the steps, keeled over, looking in a very bad way, but still alive.

I knew there wasn't much I could do for this poor thing, but I put a glove on and picked it up and put it on a cloth, went out to the back garden and just sat and held it in my hand for about 20 minutes, gently speaking soothing words to it. It lay there very still, closing its eyes and only occasionally opening them. I felt an overwhelming compassion for this poor creature, and a sense of needing to just hold it and give it some assurance in its shock and trauma.

Eventually I needed to get on with some work, but I didn't want to abandon the bird (we have lots of cats coming into our garden!) so I found a small box and rested the bird on the cloth in it, placing it outside the patio door where I could still keep an eye on it. It was as comfortable and safe as it could be in its last hours, and was under my watchful eye.

Except that it didn't die! When I went back out about an hour later suddenly it flew out and on to the ground and then on to a branch of a shrub and minutes later was gone. What I thought was a hopeless situation had turned around and my little bird had revived and survived, had emerged alive!

And as I was reflecting on how I looked after that bird and the compassion I felt for it as I held it in its hour of need, I was struck by how that is a small picture of how God holds and sustains us

in our hour of need, in our sinking boat; how deeply he cares for us and his compassion for us. God, watching over us, never abandoning us, God with us at all times. "Don't be afraid", He says, "I am with you".

The Lord Jesus was with the disciples in the sinking boat, and our same Lord is with us today in those situations in which we also feel like we're sinking, whatever they may be.

Do not be afraid, Jesus says, Have faith in me.

