



Sermon: - 13th August 2017

When Jesus is not in the boat

1 Kings 19: 9–19; Matthew 14: 22–33

When I was a child my best friend went to the local Baptist church. It always seemed much more exciting to me than my own church so I used to go along with her to the “Band of Hope” and to the Sunday School. There we sang all the old Redemption Hymns, like “Count your Blessings”, and “This is my Story, this is my Song”. We also sang a little chorus which goes “With Jesus in the boat we can smile at the storm, smile at the storm, smile at the storm, with Jesus in the boat we can smile at the storm, as we go sailing home”.

I have a bit of a problem with this little chorus. It’s a cliché, and I don’t think I am alone in disliking clichés. I think it rather reduces Jesus to being a kind of spiritual security blanket, it’s a smug little chorus, it makes the storm sound like nothing more than a choppy sea and so it seems to me that it rather belittles the reality of some of the storms that can hit us in life.

I think of my friend whose husband committed suicide leaving her with two small boys to bring up on her own.

I think of another whose husband had a nervous breakdown, plunging the family into months of trauma.

I think of the family who discover that their daughter has been the victim of abuse.

The family whose mother drank herself to death

The family whose young adult son was diagnosed with cancer, and died three weeks later.

All these people are faithful Christian people, people who have worked and struggled and prayed and believed

And the list could go on... You will know many who have hit storms in their lives

You will have had storms in your life.

No, in the face of storms we do not smile. Still less sing little choruses of light-hearted certainty. In the face of storms, we need courage... lots of courage.

But the other thing that this little chorus does not take into account is that when the winds blow and the sea rages, when the storms of life blow up around us, often we feel that Jesus is not even in the boat. And this is the situation in which the disciples find themselves.

Several years ago, David and I were in Israel, at the Sea of Galilee. It was hot and calm and peaceful. And then suddenly, with no warning, the wind rose and the sky darkened and before we knew it there was a storm raging.

Although the disciples were experienced sailors, this sea is treacherous, and unlike other instances when the storm clouds gathered, this time, Jesus was not with them. Indeed, when they saw him he seemed distant, and unreal, and terrifying. They felt alone and at a loss. Does that sound familiar?

Our Scriptures abound with references to God's constancy, faithfulness, nearness in times of difficulty. Deuteronomy 4: 31 "He will never leave you nor forsake you", Matthew 28:20 "I am with you always, to the end of the age", and Isaiah 43: 1 "Do not be afraid, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine." The gospel encourages us to place our trust in verses such as these, we can certainly have faith in them... or at least we can do until they no longer seem to be true in our experience. Until we face some crisis and the truth is that we have no sense of God's presence or reality... no sense of what he had promised of peace and strength... perhaps we might feel like angrily accusing God... "You promised"... "What are you going to do about this?", "Why is this happening to me?" and of course "Where are you?"

When the storms of life hit us, whatever they may be, we want to be sure that God is not only there, but that he cares, yet I am sure for many of us that is the last thing we feel in the midst of a crisis.

Rather I suspect that for many of us in the course of our life journey and faith journey some storm blows up in our lives. personal, circumstantial, spiritual, medical, emotional, financial, relational, whatever... and God seems to be absent, or a distant unreachable figure. We find it impossible to communicate. There is no sense of comforting presence.

Many of us find ourselves subject to fierce storms in our personal lives, and when this happens what we want to do is batten down the hatches... and we hope to find God along with us speaking peace and – all being well – making the nasty storm go away! Like children afraid of the dark we want someone to cuddle us and put the light on! But how often in the mist of all these circumstances do we feel that Jesus is, in fact, just not there!

What are we to make of this situation in which we find ourselves, a distant God in the midst of a storm? Let's imagine again the scene, we are in the boat with the disciples. The wind has risen, whipping the waves into towering walls of water, the sky darkens, clouds gather and the rain lashes across the surface of the lake. The storm rages around us. Where is Jesus when you need him, where is Jesus?

Is this an experience that we can relate to? Do we sometimes feel that all around us things are going pear shaped, but the last thing we feel is a sense of God's comforting presence? Sometimes in these circumstances, does he not seem to be far away rather than close by? But this experience is more common than we might think. In fact, the absence of Jesus in the gospels is a very interesting study in itself...

He is absent when the disciples are struggling – and failing – to heal an epileptic boy,

He is absent when Lazarus dies and Mary & Martha are filled with grief, you remember Martha's words "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died!" How poignant are these words, "Lord, if you had been here..."

And he is absent when this storm hits the disciples' boat. Where are you, Lord? Where are you when we need you?

Where is Jesus when a storm blows up? He is in the midst of the storm.

That, it seems to me, is what this passage suggests. That when a storm blows up in our lives, although we may not feel the presence of God close by, he is there. Jesus is in the midst of it. We may not see the storm coming, we may be taken by surprise, we may look around for his comforting presence and not find it, but when we look with the eyes of faith, as the disciples did, eventually, we will see that he is there, in the storm, walking towards us, holding out his hand to us in love and compassion to journey with us through the storm.

And in our heart of hearts we know that Jesus will not simply take the storm away, life isn't like that. However, it's my experience that storms in life are easier to face if you are not alone. To have someone walking with you, holding your hand as you negotiate the terrain, suffering with you in the darkness, makes it easier to bear the difficulties you face. It may be a friend, or a partner, a child or a parent, but having someone to share the pain with makes it, not easier, not less painful, but more bearable. I think that darkness faced in loneliness is darker than darkness faced in the company of a friend.

A number of years ago my family was facing a number of crises. It seemed as though everything was going wrong at the same time. It was our annus horribilus. I won't go into the details, but I felt as though no matter which direction I turned the outlook was bleak and black and hopeless. In despair, I did cry out to God, "Where are you", and in the darkness of my despair it felt as though a little candle had been lit. It didn't make the darkness any less dark, it didn't take away the hurt and pain that these situations were causing, but it did give me the assurance that I would come out of the other side of this time of trouble. That there was a future and a hope. Perhaps not the future I wanted, but a future none the less. And that gave me the strength to continue to put one foot in front of the other. To walk on in the darkness. I looked into the darkness ahead of me, and I saw that God was already there.

So, what this leaves us with is that in the storms of life, God is there, when we turn to him, God is there, when we cry to him, when we rage at him, he is there, not taking the storm away, but waiting in the midst of it for us to call on him, even if it is in rage or in fear, but calling, reaching out to him so that he can, in turn reach out to us, and hold our hand in the darkness, walk with us through the storm, and bring us safely to shore.