

Sermon - a storm, and weapons of righteousness

Based on the readings: Job 38.1–11; Psalm 107.1–3, 23–32; 2 Corinthians 6.1–13; Mark 4.35–41

A comic-book image

- Today's Gospel story is an iconic one - the stilling of the storm - in which the Son of God manifests divine power over nature.
- Of all the miraculous actions of Jesus - healing many, turning water into wine, raising the dead and so on - this is the one that brings us closest to the modern understanding of people with super powers, like Superman himself.
- We can easily imagine Jesus in cinematic imagery, standing sure-footed in the prow of a tossing wind-swept boat, with waves breaking around him.
- No matter how much the boat moves and the waves surge, he is able to stand resolutely still.
- And then, stretch his arms skyward, pull down some invisible cosmic force to be held to his chest with sinewy clenching fingers, only to throw it out as a flattening force-field that spreads out as a visible shockwave, leaving behind mirror-calm water, and the air and sky strangely silent and still, with the stars suddenly showing where there had only been scudding storm clouds before.
- It's a fantastically dramatic image that our imagination can engage with fairly easily.

Power over nature

- The reading from the book of Job provides a description of the Lord God challenging the mere mortal named Job, comparing Job's comprehension with that of our creator God who
laid the foundation of the earth ... who shut in the sea with doors ... [who] made the clouds [the earth's] garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band. (Job 38.1–11)
- This poetic description comes from the understanding that only our creator God has such power and control of his own creation.
- So the disciples are rightly confounded, amazed and fearful that Jesus, as wonderful and inspiring a human teacher as he was, should show this same kind of power over God's creation:
they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' (Mark 4.41)

The context in Mark's gospel account

- I'm going to step back for a moment, and reflect briefly on the narrative in Mark's Gospel account so far, and also look slightly ahead.
- In chapter two, Jesus shows his authority over the Jewish rules and regulations, healing a man's withered hand on the Sabbath, forgiving people's sins, openly eating with tax-collectors and sinners without assuming he had become ritually unclean while doing so, and gathering wheat on the Sabbath to eat.
- Two Sundays ago we explored part of chapter three, in which those religious leaders who were opposing him accused him of being in collusion with the prince of demons.
- Jesus responded by saying that if Satan was a metaphorical strong man in charge of the house, then it would take a stronger man to bind the first, in order to ransack that house - the implication being that he, Jesus, was the stronger man, showing his authority over the prince of demons.
- Jesus also said that those who practise their faith by following the will of God are his spiritual family.

- In chapter four Jesus has to sit in a boat beside the water's edge, so that he can teach the pressing crowds parables about the kingdom of God - stories about seeds growing: the parable of the sower, the parable of the farmer growing a crop of grain, the parable of the mustard seed.
- These are also parables about faith, and the consequences of co-operating faithfully with God.

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- It is this same boat that Jesus was preaching from, in which the disciples *'took him with them ... just as he was'* (Mark 4.36)
- After the stilling of the storm, Jesus delivers the Gerasene demoniac of those possessing him, and the demons enter a herd of swine which drown themselves.
- He then returns back across the lake, heals a woman who'd been haemorrhaging for twelve years, and raises Jairus' daughter from the dead (we'll be exploring these last two stories next Sunday.)
- In all these events Jesus continues to show that he is the stronger man - stronger than the powerful, chaotic, destructive forces of this world.
- Just as God created order out of chaos in the beginning, so Jesus asserts that same authority to establish order wherever he encounters destructive chaos in this world.

Faith when we call

- In all these events he keeps encouraging people to exercise their faith.
- Jesus speaks to the disciples in the boat with him: *'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'* (Mark 4.40)
- He was able to sleep in the midst of the chaos of the storm, because of his confidence in God, and his confidence in the power of God within him.
- And yet the disciples wake him in their anxious fear, and criticise his calm: *'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'* (Mark 4.38)
- This is not to say that they, and all other disciples - including ourselves - shouldn't call on the Lord when faced with trouble.
- No - we are expected to.
- Psalm 107, set for today, describes sailors in a storm:
*Then they cried to the Lord in their distress:
and he took them out of their trouble.
He calmed the storm to a silence:
and the waves of the sea were stilled.
Then they were glad because they were quiet:
and he brought them to the haven they longed for. (Psalm 107.28-30)*
- Our Lord tells us to call on him when we are distressed and troubled, when we find ourselves in the chaotic storms of life, whether they are from outside of us or from some inner turmoil.
- Because Mark's gospel account shows Jesus time and again, having the greater authority - greater than any chaos that we might find ourselves encountering.
- And Jesus calls on us to have faith in him, so that when we call upon him, we can trust him to give us the peace that we're looking for, and bring us to a safe haven where we can be refreshed.

Paul's life-storms

- Paul, in writing again to the Corinthians, reminds us of God's grace, when he quotes:
*'At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.'* (2 Corinthians 6.2)
- Paul goes on to describe how much turmoil and destructive experiences he has endured to continue being faithful to his understanding of God's will for himself.

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- He rejoices that through all these challenging experiences, through all these life-storms, God has enriched him in amazing ways:

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 6.8–10)

Wielding weapons!

- How did Paul do this?
- How did Paul practise this active faith and trust in the Lord?
- How did he counter the kind of fearful anxiety that the disciples were experiencing when they shook Jesus awake, accusing him of not caring whether they lived or died?
- I think that Paul firstly recognised that his own faith was a gift of God, and that he was dependent on God's power to exercise that faith.
- It is also clear that Paul's faith was an active one - it was something that he did.
- His faith was something that he wielded - that he grabbed with both hands and then used, like a tool or a weapon.
- Listen to this fascinating description he gives his own faith: *the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left. (2 Corinthians 6.7)*
- *The weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left!*
- What does he mean by that?
- Well, to be righteous is to be right-wise - that is, to be rightly aligned with the will, the desire, and the purpose of God.
- And Paul gives a quick description of how to achieve this right alignment: *by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. (2 Corinthians 6.6-7)*
- The bizarre aspect is that none of these things sound like the characteristics of weapons at all: *patience, kindness, love, truth* - what weapon can be described in that way?
- For Paul, ensuring that one is rightly-wisely aligned for God's purpose and will, means that one is aligned with the force that is greater than the forces of destruction and chaos, the forces of fear and anxiety.
- For Paul, being actively right-wise with God was sufficient to combat everything trying to destroy God's peace.

As Paul, so Jesus

- If you think about it, this is exactly what Jesus was doing.
- In his own life, and teaching, and interactions with others, Jesus practised *purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. (2 Corinthians 6.6-7)*
- And when the time came for Jesus to be woken up in the storm in the midst of the lake, he was then able to simply wield *the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left*, and invoke God's power to manifest God's order and peace.

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So may you, when you are facing inner or outer storms, be prompt to cry out to the Lord.

May you have faith and confidence that God is greater than whatever is overwhelming you, and is already with you in that situation.

In this, may you be encouraged to wield the weapons of righteousness, for both the right hand and the left, through practising purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, and truthful speech.

And may you actively use God's gift of faith, and through his power, know the peace that passes all understanding.