

Pentecost 3
25/6/2006

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 17:32 - 49
Psalm 9
2 Corinthians 6:1 - 13
Mark 4:35 - 41

The stilling of the storm.

Once a week the Hackney Baths in London are taken over by men and boys from an ultra-orthodox Jewish community, because it is an injunction of the Talmud that Jewish Fathers should teach their sons to swim. The background to this injunction was a visceral dread of the sea that was prevalent in biblical times. The sea was the abode of the powers of chaos that God had subdued at the Creation, but which could threaten life at any time, as in the days of Noah, or as in the closing of the Red Sea on the Egyptians. At the same time the unleashing of the chaos could mean salvation, as in the escape of Moses and the people from Pharaoh's army, and the preservation of Noah and his family in the Ark.

Dread of the sea, and the possibility of redemption, is part of the context for the Gospel reading for today. The graphic is an impressionistic image of a boat and its occupants in tumult. Later they found peace when Jesus, roused from his sleep, stilled the storm. As we know, the image of a boat or ship has become a parable of the Church, the community of faith, sailing on the sea of life. This image has been taken up, in particular, by the World Council of Churches. St Augustine also said person's heart is a sailing boat, which cannot be wrecked, so long as it stays focussed on Christ.

In pausing to reflect on this reading we are not so much considering what might be called a nature miracle. We are engaging in thoughts about the church and the true source of its life, which is found in God, the Creator, and expressed amongst us in Jesus. Coincidentally this week was the 29th anniversary of the inauguration of the Uniting Church in Australia. And we are sailing towards the meeting of the 11th Assembly when a number of weighty matters concerning the life and mission of our church will be debated, some of them capable of delivering us into chaos and upheaval. How are we travelling, and what might the stilling of the storm have to say that would help us in our life of worship and service?

This story is an example of what Jesus meant when he announced at the beginning of Mark: **the time has come, the Kingdom of God has come near.** An event of unsurpassable significance has taken place: in Jesus of Nazareth, God has turned towards us. The reading for today declares that the power to bring order out of chaos, to stabilize and redeem the community that was in overwhelming fear of its life, resides in Jesus. Deep anguish amongst the disciples was replaced by his gift of peace. There follow stories of healing, and of raising Jairus' daughter from death. What Mark is saying is that where Jesus goes the power of God is no longer aloof from this puzzling and confusing world, but is at work to save, to graciously include, and to make whole, so that new life appears where none was expected.

We should not miss the point that the journey the disciples made was suggested by Jesus, who challenged them to cross over to the other side. In the Gospels, whenever the disciples cross the sea like this it tends to involve mission: a movement to the borders of Gentile territory. This in itself could have held some form of threat. But this watery journey, which terrified experienced fishermen, was made at night, while Jesus slept on the steersman's cushion. Having led them into this situation of heightened risk, their leader rested.

The sleeping and rising of Jesus to still the storm is coded language which points forward to the larger picture of the cross and resurrection. While Jesus sleeps in death the community of his church falls into disarray, in mortal fear of losing its life. When he rises the power of God is displayed, calm returns, and the Spirit empowers the disciples to boldly share the good news in many new contexts.

Jesus rebuked the elements and the disciples. His rising to quell the wind and waves reveals that the power of the Creator is at work in him. His rebuke of the disciples for their little faith, and their wonder at who he is shows that they are behind the wind and the waves in their response. Even their redemption from fear and destruction has not convinced them that in him the power of life is at work for them. God is present, but their faith is small.

At one level this story has uncomplimentary things to say about the disciples. They accepted the challenge of going with Jesus to a new frontier, but they were slow to get the point, and asked: "Who is this?" But at another level, this story is cause for great hope and optimism. When the storms of life threaten the community of faith to the point of desperation, the power in Christ who has slept in our boat, is strong enough to rebuke the chaos and redeem the followers. This is about how the real strength in which we live is not our own, but has been given to us through one of us, who has shared and still shares this chaotic journey. His risen power is the power that conquers all. As we move forward past this new birthday, and on towards an important Assembly, this is the strength in which we are called to live. This is the power that will allow us to negotiate the waters of chaos. To swim, in other words.

As we face a potential storm over the question of ministry and sexuality, it is worth remembering that there have been other occasions when storms that have hit the church. These caused it to think deeply, and to renew its understanding of faith, scripture, and the world in which it lives. When Copernicus and Galileo discovered that the earth was not the centre of the universe, that the earth circled the sun, not the other way round, some ways of believing had to be adjusted. Their views did not alter the pivotal role given to Christ, but it did reshape our view of the world and detached faith from some things to which it was wrongly attached. It is also true that the followers of Christ took a long time to accept what this new knowledge meant for faith. Similarly, the impact of Darwin's theories continues to be felt. Although some people have worked out how to allow science and faith to coexist happily, numerous rearguard actions, led by Christians, continue.

In the case of sexuality there is a real sense in which the world is asking fresh questions of how life together is to be understood, given that human sexuality seems to be more complex and ambivalent than we used to think. Is this purely cultural change, or is something deeper going on? We are used to operating culturally and traditionally in these matters, and there needs to be more science to help us than there has been to date.

But how are we to proceed? Is this a time to batten down the hatches and reject the call to consider a new frontier of learning and life? Or is this the time to be bold enough to cross over to the other side and journey through new territories; frontiers of understanding that may ultimately enliven our faith, build up the church, and enrich our appreciation of the human community?

Copernicus, Galileo and Darwin presented new challenges to faith, which resulted in the church working out its beliefs in fresh words and deeds, but it was not plain sailing. A community of faith will not always endure calm waters. But it has the one thing that will enable it to be strong when it feels weak, to be rich when it seems poor, and to have everything, when to all other eyes, it has nothing at all. The church has Christ, who has slept and risen amongst us, and in this strength it can rest, and live and grow, to the glory of God.