

Introduction

One of the things I do after an evening's work is to settle down and watch something I have recorded on my TV. I prefer quiz programmes or documentaries. One of the programmes I have found compelling recently has been the series 'saving lives at sea'. I am continually struck by the bravery and commitment of the lifeboat crews who regularly put their own lives at risk to rescue people who are in difficulty on the sea. Even in good weather the sea can be treacherous and powerful but surely there are few things more frightening than being in a small boat in the midst of a violent storm. The need for rescue becomes obvious.

Today's reading from Luke's Gospel is a very familiar story, one that many of us have heard many times and we may think we know what it is all about. However, it is a very important story and is part of Luke's attempt to enable his listeners to understand more about Jesus. At the root of the Gospel is the question, "Who is this man?" The narrative, all the stories included in the narrative are there to specifically answer this question.

Some years ago I had the privilege of staying in the hills over the sea of Galilee and being able to observe it in various moods. It could be calm and tranquil but it could also be dark and menacing and all the car parks on the southern shore bore warning signs because in a storm the sea could flood its banks and carry cars away. Many of the disciples were fishermen, they made their living on the lake and were familiar with all its moods. They knew storms could be violent and had great respect for the power of the water.

Added to that the disciples were Jews and would from an early age have been aware of their history and the power of water seen in past times. The power of the waters of the Nile to sweep the Egyptian troops to their death, the flood waters wiping out life on earth in Noah's time, the story of Jonah, who in running away from God's calling on his life encountered a storm that only subsided when he was thrown into the sea. And, of course in creation the image is of the Spirit of God brooding over the deep - chaos which was a depiction of evil and disorganisation and bringing order. The Israelites were not a seafaring nation and they had a deep respect for the power of water.

Left to themselves the fishermen may well not have put out to sea that night and they may well have asked themselves the question, "Why did Jesus take them across the water when surely he would know a storm was brewing?"

When Jesus rescues the disciples from a storm we are seeing in concrete terms what his teaching about the Kingdom of God means. God's Kingdom is at hand. It isn't how people thought it would be but this is the real thing. The same power that made the world and rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt is now living in Jesus and acting through him.

The forces of evils, shown in the opposition Jesus encountered are roused and angry and threatening, but Jesus is so confident of God's presence and power that he can fall asleep on a pillow. The disciples are upset: doesn't he care that the boat is about to go to the bottom and take them with it? Jesus gently rebukes them, putting them on the spot, "Where is your faith?"

The mistake the disciples made was to focus on their circumstances and not on Jesus himself. They were left at the end asking the question the Gospels set out to answer, "Who is this man?" I believe there are things we can learn from this story.

Firstly Jesus leads us into storms

This is an important principle of Christian life that it can take us time to grasp. Many of us become Christians thinking that with Jesus on our side life should be all calm and lovely and we can be deeply shocked when life hits us in the face.

It is true that sometimes we find ourselves in difficulties because of our own sin and foolishness but sometimes trouble comes to us unannounced and undeserved. We find ourselves asking the question, "Why has this happened to me?" and trying to find some reason why things have happened to us. I know I have done this. But Jesus didn't solve all the disciples' problems and protect them from trials and perplexities. In fact sometimes he led them quite deliberately into them - and this is one such occasion.

In Peter's first letter to the Christians in Asia we read, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trials you are suffering as though something strange was happening to you". It seems that over the years he had learned that there are times when Jesus does lead his followers through dark valleys and difficult places. But why does he do that?

On this occasion it seems to me that it is some sort of Test.

- 1) The disciples were doubting whether Jesus really cared for them. In their minds if he had cared he wouldn't have ignored the storm surrounding them and carried on sleeping. He would have been up there doing something about it. At this stage in their relationship with Jesus they hadn't developed that certain faith that trusted in every circumstance' That sort of faith comes through experience, through knowing someone and through learning that they have your best interests at heart. However the fact is that God does expect us to trust him He does have our best interests at heart as he has shown throughout salvation history and surely we can learn to trust someone who loves us so much that he was prepared to give his life for us.
- 2) The disciples also failed to trust Jesus' word. He had spoken to them about going over to the other side of the lake. That was his intention and his expectation. In the storm they had forgotten what he had said. They had not held onto his word to give themselves the assurance that they would reach the shore safely. They had allowed the voice of the storm to silence the voice of the Lord.

This is something we all do at times. I know there are times in my life when I have been so overwhelmed by the things that are happening to me that I have forgotten the power God has shown again and again to rescue me; When I have been so focussed on the turmoil around me that I have forgotten God's promises to me.

That is why it is so important to know scripture, to learn God's promises and to have them, at the heart of our lives so that when trouble comes, as it will, we can automatically remember what God has promised us.

Jesus stilled the storm *read verse 24b*. In Mark we are told the words Jesus used, 'Peace be still' His words are reminiscent of the strong language he uses elsewhere in this Gospel to rebuke demons. Jesus is

subduing the powers of darkness and bringing order out of chaos. But perhaps the most important thing for the disciples was this: for a brief moment they saw the majesty, power and glory of Jesus unveiled. They witnessed his Lordship over nature and its forces. Like men in a storm who see the world momentarily illuminated by lightning and are able to get their bearings again, the disciples saw Jesus 'just as he was', in his glory. It made them realise that if they could answer one question they would have their bearings both for time and eternity: "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him"

Sometimes what we take from this story is the lesson that Jesus stilled the storm in nature and he can still the storm in our lives as well. That of course is true. But it is not the central truth of this passage, for Luke tells us that the stilling of the storm raised a spiritual storm in the disciples' hearts. "In fear and amazement they were awed to discover who Jesus truly was.

Every test and trial, every storm in life is another opportunity for us to see the glory of Jesus Christ and discover his power in our lives.

There is a favourite painting of mine. It shows a storm tossed sea. There are huge white tipped waves crashing against a cliff. Dark clouds loom over head and the brush strokes show a very powerful wind at work. High up on the cliff, on a small ledge is a baby bird huddled under its mother's wing. The painting is called "Peace".