

## THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

3<sup>rd</sup> May 2009

### Mark 4:35-41 Storms of Faith

What is your first reaction when trouble sets in or disaster strikes?

Are you galvanised into action, spurred on by the great challenge to overcome the odds and survive?

Are you frozen by fear, not capable of movement or action because the enormity of the problem paralyses you?

Are you stoic to endure whatever hardship comes your way, recognising that this is part of life and you just need to put up with it?

Or are you driven to despair, unable to see a way out, without hope of rescue?

For the Christian, there is another dimension to this question: how quickly do we turn to God in prayer? Is this our first response to any situation which is difficult or dangerous or somehow troublesome? Or is it our last resort after we have exhausted other avenues of escape or coping?

An even more interesting question is what do you pray for?

Do you blame God for your predicament, accusing him of negligence for letting it happen?

Do you beg him for mercy, confessing all your recent sins and promising to serve him wholeheartedly if he rescues you one more time?

Do you pray for perseverance and strength to heroically endure this trial?

And crucially, what do you expect, *really* expect, God to do about it?

Nearly 15 years ago, Paul and I were asked to visit Bob Smithson and pray over him, as he was suffering from terminal cancer. I believed God could cure him; but didn't actually expect him to. Bob died some months later. However, I did expect God to comfort Bob and Millie through his last days; which he did.

Some would say that if I had the "faith" to believe that Bob would recover, then he would have recovered. But I don't think that's what faith really is, or how God in his mercy decides who he will let live or die.

So tonight I want to look at the well-known story of Jesus calming the storm from this angle: what can we learn from it about faith in Christ? It clearly has something to teach us, given that the disciples were reprimanded for their lack of faith.

First, let's remind ourselves about the episode.

Jesus had been preaching all day at the shore of Galilee – using a boat as a pulpit, to stop the crowds from pressing around him. As evening came, he wanted to cross over to the other side of the lake – maybe a 15 mile crossing. So off they set, captained no doubt by Peter or Andrew who were experienced sailors on the lake.

Many of the disciples were used to making their living by fishing in the Sea of Galilee. The sea is a very large inland lake, perhaps 20 miles long by 15 miles wide at the widest point – somewhat larger than the lakes in the lake district! These men would be used to the weather conditions there, which could result in squalls suddenly appearing, as if from nowhere. They would know how to handle their boats in that situation, and would not scare or panic easily.

But this storm was as bad as anything they had seen. Maybe the boat was carrying more people than normal, or the squall was more furious – in fact Matthew uses the word “seismos” to describe it, from which we get “seismology” – it was as sudden and as violent as an earthquake. The boat began to take on water faster than they could bail it out, which meant only one thing: if the storm did not stop soon the boat would sink, and most likely they would all drown!

When the first water came in a few of them started to bail it out again, and they noticed that Jesus was still asleep - but let him be. Then the water came in even faster, and every one furiously set about scooping the water out again. It was beginning to niggle them that Jesus was sleeping through this, instead of mucking in with the rest of them. Anyone who has been in that sort of situation knows that everyone needs to pull their weight if they are going to get through, no matter whether they were hardened sailor, wimpy tax collector, or even the leader of their movement.

Imagine how the disciples felt when their very lives were at risk for the lack of Jesus help to bail out the boat.

In exasperation, they shake him from his sleep, and in their somewhat irrational thinking ask him if he doesn't care that they should drown! Were they thinking straight, they would know that he cared; though it seems pretty clear that they could not think straight enough to know just how much Jesus could help.

When Jesus wakes up, he does not join their frantic efforts to keep the boat afloat. Instead, he talks to the wind and waves as though they were naughty children: “Quiet! Be still!”. Amazingly, and quite unlike naughty children in my experience, the wind ceases and the raging sea becomes as calm as a millpond.

Now that the crisis is over, the disciples probably felt a bit foolish for having got so het up about it. But Jesus is not happy with them. His rebuke is not that they had woken him up – I can be quite grumpy if someone disturbs me from a nice nap, but if it is for a good reason then even I am not likely to complain!

Rather, his rebuke is that they had been so afraid, and had shown a lack of faith.

I always find this an intriguing story, particularly when I think about what the disciples and Jesus expected from one-another.

What did the disciples expect Jesus to do? If they expected him to miraculously calm the storm, then their reaction of fear is surprising. If they didn't, then why did they cry to him to save them?

It is easy to imagine them getting frustrated because they were having to do all the hard work while Jesus slept. Maybe they did think that the extra help which another man could give in bailing out would make the difference. But I suspect that in the heat of the moment they didn't really know how Jesus could help – but they did believe he could do something. They had seen him work miracles many times by now, and they knew he had a special relationship with God – so it was natural for them to turn to him for help. I think it is to their credit that they did; it shows that, while they may not understand the extent of his power or his identity, they did naturally turn to him for help.

So what is it that Jesus expected of them, which they didn't do? He explicitly criticises them for their fear and their lack of faith - he doesn't tell them off for having woken him up or for asking him for help. It seems clear that the boat was in real danger; had there been a good chance of keeping it afloat until the storm blew over, the fishermen would have realised this and would not have been so afraid. So Christ can't be criticising them for being "big girls' blouses" as the saying goes, for being wimps in the face of a bit of wind and rain.

Rather, Jesus expected them to realise that God would not allow them all to drown, because Christ's mission was only just beginning. If they realised that, they would not have feared for their survival – they may have woken Jesus up, ideally by saying something like "Wake up Lord! We need you to get us to safety". Or perhaps more impressively, to pray to God for their survival directly.

If Jesus words to the disciples seem harsh to us, it is because we know that we would have done no better than them, and so would deserve the same rebuke.

There is an aspect to their lack of faith which we will pick up later: that they should accuse Jesus of not caring if they drowned.

But before we do that, let's look at the significance of the miracle itself.

Mark records this not just as an exciting episode in Jesus ministry, but so that his readers can understand more about Jesus and his Gospel.

In these early chapters, Mark is building up a picture of who Jesus is. As you may recall, he started with John the Baptist preparing the way, then introduced Jesus himself to the expectant reader at his baptism, where the Spirit descends on him and God speaks from heaven to commend his Son.

His unique abilities soon become apparent as he casts out demons and cures diseases. His way with people too is in marked contrast to other religious leaders, both in the company he keeps and his attitude to their traditions. His moral authority is established in confrontations with the religious establishment, where he always comes out ahead – appearing to the reader as the champion of common sense over religious pomp.

Mark then records some of Jesus teaching, which was often in parables; this teaching is ushering in a new Kingdom, though the character and nature of that kingdom is unconventional and perhaps even mysterious.

This next revelation builds on what has gone before, and gives one of the biggest clues yet to the identity of this man Jesus. While no doubt the disciples did ask themselves what sort of man he was, Mark expects his readers to do the same thing. It was unusual, to say the least, for someone to be able to cure disease and drive out evil spirits. It was truly exceptional for someone to be able to control the weather with just a word.

In our weather-obsessed country, we would be particularly impressed if someone were to change the weather merely by speaking! How great would that be on one of Chapel outings, to create perfect conditions for sailing or punting or whatever! But many of Mark's readers would see a deeper significance than this. While today we understand a great deal about weather patterns and causes and effects – though not so much that we always get predictions right – in those days the weather was much more mysterious. And also important at a much more fundamental level than just choosing whether to take a raincoat to work or not!

Two thousand years ago, everybody knew the importance the weather had for their crops. A good year, with sun and rain in the right proportions and at the right time, would result in a good crop, giving enough food to keep them going over the winter. But a bad year with not enough sun, or no rain in the spring, or heavy rain just before harvest, would mean a poor crop and a hard struggle through the following year to have enough for everyone to eat.

So control of the weather was understood to be in the hands of the gods – you probably know that many religious festivals and practices (whether Jewish or pagan) had to do with the weather. For the Jews, it was clear that God alone controlled the weather, indeed this was made explicit throughout the Old Testament. For example, Jeremiah 31:35:

*<sup>35</sup> This is what the Lord says,  
he who appoints the sun  
to shine by day,  
who decrees the moon and stars  
to shine by night,  
who stirs up the sea  
so that its waves roar—  
the Lord Almighty is his name*

The specific case of a boat in a storm would remind them of Psalm 107:

*<sup>23</sup> Others went out on the sea in ships;  
they were merchants on the mighty waters.  
<sup>24</sup> They saw the works of the Lord,  
his wonderful deeds in the deep.  
<sup>25</sup> For he spoke and stirred up a tempest  
that lifted high the waves.  
<sup>26</sup> They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths;  
in their peril their courage melted away.  
<sup>27</sup> They reeled and staggered like drunken men;  
they were at their wits' end.  
<sup>28</sup> Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he brought them out of their distress.  
<sup>29</sup> He stilled the storm to a whisper;*

*the waves of the sea were hushed.*

<sup>30</sup> *They were glad when it grew calm,  
and he guided them to their desired haven.*

<sup>31</sup> *Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love  
and his wonderful deeds for men.*

<sup>32</sup> *Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people  
and praise him in the council of the elders.*

Quite clearly, Jesus is doing something which God himself was responsible for. In demonstrating control over the weather, Jesus was revealing himself as God-man. No wonder the disciples were afraid! Mark expects us to pick up on this too. What sort of man is this? The God-man, the son of God.

The young children this morning learned this song:

*"With Christ in the vessel I can smile at the storm,  
Smile at the storm, smile at the storm,  
With Christ in the vessel I can smile at the storm,  
Until he takes me home.  
Sailing, sailing home, sailing, sailing home!  
With Christ in the vessel I can smile at the storm,  
Until he takes me home."*

I learned it in Sunday School when I was 7 or 8 years old, along with some actions that were fun to do, even if I did probably do them out of time.

Like many things in Sunday School, and dare I say it like many "adult" choruses today, it presents a simplified and rather twee picture of life as a Christian. We go round with permanent grins on our faces, because we have Christ in us therefore nothing else matters. Simba the lion cub, like many would-be super heroes, could laugh in the face of danger. And so we can smile at the storm.

But both attitudes are naive. When storms of life assail us, we may be in for a surprise: we may find we can't smile, and God seems to be asleep for he doesn't stop the storm. It was certainly true that the disciples would not have drowned with Christ in their boat, because clearly God was going to make sure that his son could fulfil his mission. But it is not true that, in a similar situation, everyone who believes in Christ will be spared. If we could get statistics for such things, we would probably find that born-again Christians are just as likely to die in accidents and disasters as the rest of humanity.

Does this mean that God doesn't care for us? Of course not. Does this mean that he breaks his promises to us? No way.

We can all be confident in the promises Christ has given us; but in order for our faith not to waver, we have to understand what those promises are. If we think Christ promises us a cushy life, then when we encounter hardship our faith will take a battering. It is amazing that some people still keep their faith in supposed promises of health and prosperity when health, prosperity or both slip away, without having to change either their view of His promises, or their trust in him. When the world sees such faith, it either admires it for the stoic hope that it endows, or ridicules it for its obvious lack of reason! But this is not what true faith is about. The disciples were not criticised because they acknowledged that they were in grave danger from the storm.

Christ does give us great promises in his word, but he never suggests we will have a trouble free life. A couple of promises sum up the spirit of what God guarantees for us:

*John 16:33*

*33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

Quite the opposite to promising a trouble-free life, Christ himself promises that we *will* have trouble in the world – but in the midst of that trouble we can have peace in him. This is not sentimental wishful thinking – but based on the fact that Christ has overcome the world.

*Romans 8:28:*

*28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

This promise is given in the middle of Paul's great exposition of the Christian life and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He is not saying that all things that happen to us will be good in themselves; but that, whatever happens to us, God is going to use it for our good. He goes on to say:

*Romans 8:31-32:*

*<sup>31</sup> What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

Again we have strong grounds for believing this to be true, even when our immediate circumstances are difficult and don't give us reason to hope. Those grounds are in Christ's sacrifice for us, his death for us on the cross. If God went to that extreme length to save us, then we can be totally confident that he loves us and will see us through whatever life throws at us.

Understanding these promises properly, we can be confident. The great constant in life is not our material circumstances, our health, our family, our prospects – those things can change as quickly as the weather on the sea of Galilee. The great constant is God's love for us, which never ceases or wanes. Does Christ care if we drown? Of course he does!

*Matthew 10:29:*

*<sup>29</sup> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. <sup>30</sup> And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. <sup>31</sup> So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*

This is not a promise of a life without pain. God cares for sparrows, but allows them to die – and come to that, to be sold for food! He knows us in intimate detail, even down to the number of hairs on our head – though that doesn't mean we won't go bald. Neither does it mean that we will not suffer, or die.

This is the key to being at inner peace in the midst of suffering. It is not that we will go around with senseless smiles through our darkest trials – to do so is to deny the reality of those trials. We can weep and mourn; there is plenty to weep about in this life. But in the midst of that mourning, we can hold on to our knowledge that God loves us, that he stands with us in our grief and sorrow, indeed that he *carries* us through those darkest of nights. Nothing that happens to us can change that love. How can we be so sure? Because of Christ, because of his death, because of his resurrection. If God gave up his only son for us, we can be sure of his love even in our deepest trials.

We may want to wake him during the storm, we may cry to him for deliverance or forbearance, we may never understand why he lets us suffer the way we often do. But true faith is never to doubt *that he cares*.

That is who God is. It is his character, his very nature, to care. He is love. He will always be love. He will always care for us more than we can ever imagine. In that we can have absolute faith.