

**Pentecost 5**  
**24/6/2018**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Psalm 20**  
**Mark 4:34-41**

**Do not. Be. Afraid**

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‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’

Until this week, the assumption of perhaps every thought I have ever had about this question – and probably every sermon I have heard on it – is, Yes, Jesus does care – *of course*, Jesus cares. The evidence for this is that he stills the storm. Is this not what care would look like: noticing and acting?

I want to continue to affirm that Jesus cares but closer attention to the story undermines confidence in *too easy* a ‘Yes’ in response to the desperate question, Do you not care? Or, perhaps more to the point for those in that boat and us in ours, we might enquire more deeply of this story just what the care of Jesus *looks like*.

Crucial to all this is that Jesus has to be *woken up* in order to be made aware of a storm which has scared the b’Jesus *into* all his friends. The disciples presume, not unreasonably, that one has to be conscious to care. And so, pun (w)holy intended, they effectively ask, How – for Christ’s sake – can you sleep at a time like this? If you are the Son of God, care: command the wind and waves to be still!

The gospel’s answer to this is that it is precisely for the Christ’s sake that he sleeps – not because the Christ is tired and needs to catch up on his rest but because there is nothing present of sufficient moment to warrant him waking; there is nothing to worry about.

This is too much, of course, if the story were about a few blokes in the wrong place at the wrong time. If that were what the story told, then there is plenty to worry about and plenty to do, and the disciples are right to be holding on very tight with one hand and bailing frantically with the other. But this is *not* the point of the story.

The storm is not stilled in order to demonstrate that Jesus cares and will meet our sense of what we need. The wind and the waves are stilled not to demonstrate care but in order that Jesus might be heard – a still, small voice cutting through the wild night. He needs to be heard, not to deny or do away with the wild and frightening things, but that those things be relegated in the hearts and minds of the disciples.

‘Have you no faith?’ This is *not* to say, Can’t you fix this yourself? Of course they can’t. ‘Have you no faith?’ means, These are only wind and waves. Fear. Only. *God*.

The care Jesus demonstrates here is not he will still the storms about us. There is no promise in the story that the storm will always be stilled. Not a few of those in the boat will perish in other storms –religious and political – in the next 20 or 30 years. Many interpreters of this passage see it, in fact, as written specifically for those later situations, as an answer to *their* pressing question: does God care what is now happening to the church?

God does care what is happening to the church, but in the sense of, Why are you still afraid? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword (Romans 8.35) *separate* you from me? Have you no faith?

The stance Jesus takes before the wind and the waves is the same stance he takes in the face of the cross: there is, finally, nothing to fear here. It is scarcely pleasant – it will sometimes even be hell – but hell is not beyond God’s attention, and hell does not change that, finally, we belong not to the devil but to God. We belong to God – as the funeral service puts it – in strength *and* in weakness, in achievement *and* in failure, in the brightness of joy *and* in the darkness of despair. The ‘climate’ – what is going on in the world around us – is not a theological indicator.

Notice that, in this way of thinking about the story, it matters *not one jot* whether Jesus could actually command the wind and the waves. For all that we have said, the story is irrelevant if we seek *evidence* about whether Jesus was a miracle-worker or not. We notice most of all the calming of the waters and the wind, and much less the word which the calming makes it possible to hear: Do not be afraid; have you no faith? At the end of the story the disciples fall back in terror, now at *Jesus* and no longer at the storm. The shock is not merely that Jesus commands the storm, but that he has no fear of it. For the story, these two things are the same.

And so Jesus charges *not*, You could have done this yourself, had you the faith. He declares rather, If *God* is God, your life is not to be a fearful one. Faith is knowing what, or whom to fear, and what not to fear. Faith is knowing what does, and does not, own us.

We *will* likely be afraid in such a situation, for all the obvious reasons. The storm might be the suddenly diminished future brought by a threatening diagnosis; the unbearably quiet house brought by bereavement; the loss of a job; a bulldozer through our house; public embarrassment; the impending divorce (or even the impending marriage!).

We *will* likely be afraid in such situations, for the *obvious* reasons. Yet, in such storms – wild or still – Jesus asks, And what is it about this place you know but is *not* obvious? *You are mine*. You are mine.

In all such things you are more than conquerors through the one who loves you.

‘For I am convinced that  
neither death, nor life,  
nor angels, nor rulers,  
nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor powers,  
nor height, nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation,

will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’  
(Romans 8.37-39)

There is nothing to fear but that we might live in fear of what is not worthy of it.

Do not be afraid.

*As a possible response, a prayer of confession*

*We offer thanks and praise, O God,  
because you have created and sustained us  
and all things.*

*And yet...*

*Forgive us when  
we imagine that the first sign of danger  
is a sign of your absence.*

*Forgive us when we limit our own freedom  
by fearing things which, in the end,  
are inevitable,  
or will finally not matter.*

*Forgive us when our fears  
mean that others are denied  
the love they need.*

*Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden:  
cleansing the thoughts of our hearts  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name;  
just so, loving God,  
have mercy on us.*

*Amen.*

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