

Pentecost 14
7/08/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 37:1-4; 12-28

Ps 107

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

On being battered by the waves and having the wind against us

Not long before she died my Aunt, who was the last of my parent's generation, gave me a copy of her memoirs that contained a lot of new information. At the same time what she wrote is connected with stories we had heard as children, or were part of ourselves. She brought a particular perspective to the stories, which means what she said sometimes varied from what we previously thought was true. Her memoirs are not a record made at the time. They are memories written down later, incorporating later reflection on the events described. The Memoirs may be of interest to anyone. But if you are a Smith and inside the story, and have a relationship with the author, you read with eyes that have a different understanding.

The Gospels are not histories. They are witnesses to the story of Jesus, written in the light of the Resurrection. At a later date, stories that circulated in oral tradition were written down, and they included reflections on the contemporary life of the church. Matthew is thought to have written no later than 100 CE for a Jewish audience who had direct experience of the momentous crisis of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE. A strong pattern of thought in those times was Jewish apocalyptic writing, which interpreted current wars, rumours of wars and accompanying tribulations as the last writhing of a cosmic struggle between good and evil that would end with God vindicating the faithful and gifting them with the new age of the Kingdom. In the New Testament the events of Christ's life and death became emblematic of that struggle, and inside the family of faith, the resurrection signalled the breaking in: the first hint of the promised age to come.

The story of walking the water can be read as an account of a miracle that is impossible for us to understand. Or we can see it as a coded message, written down later, for people inside the family of the church who are under pressure, beaten by waves and battling against a strong head wind. These reflections on a crisis of Matthew's time may be helpful to us as we grapple with the crises of our times.

In the Bible and antiquity the image of the sea looms large as a source of chaotic power, of which even the gods stand in awe. Journeys across the sea are always perilous involving some sort of challenge or threat. In the Bible the sea is nevertheless part of God's creation, which has submitted to God's commands. Even the fearful sea monsters are under God's rule. Journeys across the sea, such as the crossing of the Red Sea, Jonah's journey, or Noah and the Ark are made, but in the power and strength of God. The outcome is a new beginning in life.

Today's journey across the sea begins with Jesus going to the Mountain to pray. At a simple level he wanted to escape the crowd and the disciples – and I know how he felt!. But theologically, going to the mountain to pray suggests he has gone to be with God - a post resurrection image. The disciples' journey in the boat is analogous to what it was like when they were called to “go into all the world” and preach the Gospel, and he was taken from them. It was dark and difficult. They strove against a hostile environment, beset by disruption, betrayal, blame and persecution.

By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, the safety Christians had enjoyed as a Jewish sect protected by Roman Law had begun to evaporate. New threats began to materialise, fuelled by the secrecy attached to Christian rites, and the rumours that resulted. As early as 64CE Nero found it possible to blame Christians for setting fire to Rome.

Although the disciples were sent out on their own and sorely felt Jesus' absence they were not abandoned by him. Without being asked he came to them in the time of their greatest need, in the darkest hour, when faith hope and strength were at their lowest ebb. Notice how at first they do not recognize him and are terrified by his presence. In Matthew the disciples are people of little faith. This term is used only twice: in relation to anxiety about clothing, and survival in the storm. Notice too that when he speaks, their fears are allayed and they are set free: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid”. These are truly words of comfort, and they contain a theological message. “It is I” is reminiscent of God's declaration of himself to Moses and the Prophets - a sign that Jesus has been with God and has come from God and embodies God's power. This is the power his presence embodies for his disciples when they face the life threatening turmoil of chaos and darkness.

Only Matthew has Peter step out to join Jesus in his power over the chaos. Notice what Peter says” “Lord if it is you, tell me to come”. A fragment of doubt still resides in Peter's heart but he does not step out of the boat in his own strength, nor does he ask for supernatural powers. He seeks only the reassurance that is Jesus, present in the power of God for him. Jesus said “Come” and Peter stepped forward in faith to risk his life. In doing so he learned the full meaning of faith, and the true nature of his own weakness. When allowed the wind and the waves to distract his eyes from Jesus and fell into reliance on his own power, he began to drown in the chaos. He rose again only in the strength of the one who called him to come. If Peter had not risked, he would not have learned the real meaning of faith, which is, that we live only in the strength of God. As Bonhoeffer said, faith and obedience go together: only those who believe obey, and only those who obey believe. Despite the small and wavering nature of Peter's faith, Jesus did not allow the chaos to overwhelm him. He brought peace to the boat and travelled with them to the next place.

We know about being afloat on the sea of life in this fragile boat the Church. And we know what it is like to have the wind against us. There are many things to take from this story, and yet there is really only one. Will we choose to live by faith no matter what chaos or betrayal or disruption comes to upset our discipleship as individuals and as a community of faith? When the going gets tough, will we persevere in keeping our eye on the one who called us, sends us forth, and continues to come to us, even when we least expect it? Will we continue to believe that he is the one who even now stands above the chaos that seems ready to engulf us and has the power to bring us to safety and peace. That is the power that frees us, not to avoid suffering, but to go through the suffering as he did, in faith and trust.

There is a thought from the story of Joseph that is relevant here. Today's episode is full of scheming evil hearts. There is envy, hatred, betrayal, deception and murderous intent that is only saved by the wavering nature of Reuben's concern. And yet when we read on, as we will in the coming weeks, we find that out of all the human folly the brothers could muster, the power of God brought something good. Years later, those who sought to take a life, were given life, by the one they sought to destroy.

As we reflect on our life together, and strive to keep our balance while the waves disrupt us and the wind is against us there is only one question to answer. Will we continue to live in trust of him who comes to us and says: "Take heart, It is I; do not be afraid." That is the question, our answer to which will make all the difference.
