

## STILLING THE STORM Mark 4

I've never really gone in for sailing. I rather like the description I once read that, as a sport, sailing is a bit like standing under a cold shower tearing up £20 notes.

But Jesus seemed to be quite at home sailing. He could even go to sleep in a storm.

The Sea of Galilee is about 13 miles long and 6 miles wide, at its maximum. Really quite small. But its in the Great Rift Valley that stretches right down into Africa so the wind can funnel down from the north and literally whip up a storm. I was once out on the Sea of Galilee in a strong wind, and was amazed at its power and the anger of the waves.

Jesus had had another full-on day and he was tired. So he said 'Lets go over to the other side of the lake and find a bit of peace and quiet.' But he'd reckoned without the wind. Or maybe he didn't mind. Remember Leonard Cohen said 'And Jesus was a sailor...' (Cultural reference – don't worry if its not for you!)

So Jesus was asleep at the back (I know – the stern) and he didn't know there was rising panic in the boat until they shook him awake and demanded that he did something. Which he did. He calmed the storm.

Now there are three levels at which you can take many of the gospel stories. The first is obviously the literal – what happened. We've known the story of the stilling of the storm since we were knee high to a Sunday School teacher, but what we think now as adults is kept in the secret harbour of our own minds.

Did Jesus still a storm just by telling it to quieten down? There's no need to stake your life on it, and we'll never know because it can't be proven. But if he did, it was only because love demanded it. Jesus experimented with almighty love, and let it find its own level. If Jesus was the ultimate human being maybe more things were possible to the divine love that ran through him. But maybe not - maybe that's not what being the last Word in humanity means.

I hope we won't stop praying for miracles because the world needs all the miracles it can get. But remember, every time we hear about one, we're getting a preview of the Kingdom of God. But there's no formula for success for miracles – no 'two parts prayer, three parts faith, one part luck'. We can't predict a miracle. Its not our job. 'Don't be afraid. Only believe' That's our job; the rest is up to God.

So the first way of reading this story is for its literal meaning. The second is for its theological meaning. Why did all the writers of the synoptic gospels have this story? What did they want us to understand? Simply this – that Jesus had the power of his Father, the power of the Creator. 'Who is this?' said the open-mouthed disciples. 'Even the wind and sea obey him.' In other words, this is where power lies, not in the small world of the Pharisees telling people what they could and couldn't do, telling *God* what he could and

couldn't do, in their well-ordered religion with its 633 laws and all its rituals, keeping them holy and free of contamination. No, real authority rests in this man, this Messiah, this - the human face of God.

I'm reading at present the book by James Comey, the former Director of the FBI, who stood up to Donald Trump. The description of his fight at an earlier stage of his career to get the Bush Administration to change its definition of torture in the light of the Abu Graib revelations, is terrifying. There were those in the White House who believed unspeakable things were permissible. Power is dangerous, toxic material – safe only in the right hands.

James Comey's book is called 'A Higher Loyalty.' Power is only safe in the hands of those who accept a higher loyalty than 'whatever works', or 'my nation right or wrong'. Ultimately it's only safe in the hands of God, a God who's prepared to limit his freedom and authority in the name of love, and be crucified if necessary.

And it was necessary. God is both almighty and all vulnerable, because God is love, and that's what love is like.

The first way of reading the stilling of the storm, then, is for its literal meaning. The second is for its theological meaning about authority and power. The third way of reading the story is for its personal, spiritual meaning. What does it mean for us in our life this week or another week?

I've just been reading another book by a young American academic, a 35 year old young mum with serious cancer. Her book is called *Everything Happens for a Reason – and other lies I have loved* – great title! It's one of Bill Gates' five recommendations of the moment. And John Pritchard's for that matter! She writes in a lovely, easy style, very personal and honest, and humorous. She writes, 'What would it mean for Christians to give up that little piece of the American Dream that says 'you are limitless'? Everything is not possible. The mighty Kingdom of God is not yet here... But God is here, and we are loved. It is enough.'

She goes on, 'It seemed too odd and too simplistic to say what I knew to be true, that when I knew I was [very seriously ill] I didn't feel angry, I felt loved. At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement, They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus.'

Those words: 'God is here. We are loved. It is enough.' I think the message for us of the stilling of the storm is just that. 'God is with us, right here, and we are loved.' Unhealthy religion says, 'Trust in God and the things you fear won't happen to you.' But healthy religion says 'Trust in God. The things you fear might well happen to you, *but they are nothing to be afraid of.*' Why? Because God is here and we are loved.

Jesus stilled the fear of the disciples. They knew they were in good hands. So it can be for us, whatever we face, and whenever we face it.

So, three ways of reading this well-known story – the literal, the theological, the spiritual. All of them important because (back to Leonard Cohen):

Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water  
And he spent a long time watching from his lonely wooden tower  
And when he knew for certain only drowning men could see him  
He said all men will be sailors then until the sea shall free them  
  
And we *have been* freed by the sea, the sea of baptism and faith.