

A seemingly small step of faith was ventured by the disciples in agreeing to take Jesus across to the other side of the lake as he had asked of them. This decision may not seem remarkable to us, however they already knew from experience that a journey with Jesus could be unpredictable. There is a question here for us in the living of our lives: where are we situated and what is our next step? In the boat, the disciples were exposed to the elements and also to each other. They were in a place of considerable risk and vulnerability. We have introduced many features into the world with the purpose of minimising such possibilities. Modernity has indeed achieved comfort and security for the world's rich, however with such a smooth, sheltered, risk-free existence comes a loss of connection with other people, the natural world and with ourselves. Furthermore, we now know the environmental damage of such attempts. Where will our next steps take us? By faith we may take the step involving risk and vulnerability which re-opens these connections. Our lives must be situated on this earth with its troubles and its proximity to others. We must learn to reject the flight away into a frictionless existence as a pseudo-faith. The disciples demonstrated that they were ready to journey on in the adventure of faith.

A great storm arose, the boat was already filling with water. In the Bible, the physical world does have its own laws which neither divine nor human activity violate. Yet, the distinction between God, humanity and the physical world is not as absolute as is supposed in the rigidly mechanistic world-view that has characterised our era. In the Bible, there is a close connection between God, humanity and the physical world. Take the story of the ark, of Jonah and many of the psalms. Today we are having to recognise once again this inter-connectedness as the crisis of man-made climate change has shown us that our activities do indeed effect the natural world, as well as the lives of others, particularly the poor. The storm on the lake may, I think, be read as a sign of the chaotic powers that threaten life. It was certainly a storm that threatened the disciples lives. There are many stormy chaotic powers that threaten life today: climate change, wars, unbounded materialism and over all a rage, the speechless discord of a world out of harmony with itself.

During the storm, Jesus was asleep on a cushion. In a fast, flashing world of infotainment and instant communication are we able to rest? It takes faith to release anxiety and find rest. Only if we can do so can we act with purpose. The disciples panicked, they might have looked to the experienced fishermen amongst them for leadership in the storm; instead they blamed Jesus for taking them there. There is something in our human condition that prefers to blame others, especially those in charge, than to work for the solutions ourselves. Comparing Jesus at rest with the fraught disciples, we get an insight into so many situations in our own lives. Exactly like the disciples, we often feel threatened by many matters which we later realise were rather trivial.

When Jesus woke up, his command, “Peace! Be still!” was decisive. He spoke the sovereign word of God which ordered the seas to keep their bounds. Notice there is no battle here between the forces of good and evil as there would be in a dualistic understanding of the world. Rather goodness has supreme, unchallenged command in Jesus’ word. This victory points us forward in the Gospels to Jesus’ final victory in the resurrection over the evil which had overwhelmed his life on the cross. It points forward in our world history to the final consummation of all things in God’s life. Yet now in the unfolding of history we see many terrible tragedies which speak of disaster and destruction. In this history, God’s word has spoken and will speak again. Our world, troubled though it is, has not been abandoned by God. Where would we be if we were left to ourselves in all these struggles? Our world remains a good place for life as God sustains it and limits the harm done to it.

Jesus didn’t give the disciples the time to begin speculating about what He had done, and how it relates to God’s rule of the world. He criticized their despair when faced with the storm, saying: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” These are questions that challenge us too in our own profound lack of faith which is our continual restlessness, anxiety and fear. These are questions which may bring us to penitence. Not least with regard to our misjudgements about what is important and what is trivial. This is the penitence that the Prayer Book Office of Evensong draws us to again and again. Jesus spoke with a unique divine authority which performed what it commanded, which we cannot do. Yet, how much more effective would our actions be, how much more would we be able to limit all that harms life, if we worried less about insignificant matters and more about those things that are important. This discernment of what to do and what not to do is not easy, this discernment is wisdom. Faith is the beginning of wisdom as it lifts our attention above mundane problems to the wonder of God’s Word and so enables us to see those problems in a truer perspective.

The disciples were filled with great awe at the stilling of the storm. We live in an awe-inspiring civilisation, not least Cambridge in its eminent history and traditions; London in its immense size and its concentration of all the cultures of the globe is also awesome. But we should never be overwhelmed by what we see. Much more wonderful still is the voice of Jesus, heard by faith. Speaking words which urge us on to our future encounters and engagements.

The disciples said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?” This was their time to think through what Jesus had done, and how it relates to God’s rule of the world. There could be no better picture of the community of faith than these amazed disciples, questioning each other about what has happened. Theirs is an impassioned conversation, for which vigorous and healthy dispute is certainly at hand. They know Jesus, but now they must learn much more about Him. Their understanding must be stretched to new horizons. Faith always searches for further understanding. Faith seeks to know who God is, and from that knowledge it seeks to live more joyously.