

23rd June 2024, Proper 7, Trinity 4

Job 38:1-11; Psalm 107: 23-32; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

At the age of 11, I started a new chapter in my life, at Oxford High School. On the very first day we were handed cards with quite a number of collects from the BCP on them, and also the General Thanksgiving, and another card with the school song in Latin. We were required to learn the whole lot off by heart in the first four weeks, after which we would be tested. Today's collect was one of those selected, and despite the terror of failing the test, it has remained one of my favourites, because at its heart it prays, "that thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal" Even at the age of 11 that prayer resonated with me – that we should hang on to the "things eternal" whatever life might throw at us, whatever storms, to use today's imagery, might be waiting for us.

But that is much easier said than done, because wherever we are, things will go wrong, there will be storms and the "eternal" will seem to go missing; we may no longer be aware of God in our lives. At the moment the whole world seems to be in the middle of a storm. There are wars, there is poverty and huge displacement of people. The Today programme said there are 12 million displaced in Syria, and we don't seem even to talk about Syria, because other "storms" have surpassed it. There are or have just been elections all over the place, with the increased numbers of the far right and populist movements threatening everything that was fought for in WW2 – in Europe, in the States and in this country. These global "storms" are constantly in the background while each person battles with their own individual "storms" – illness, bereavement, cost of living, loneliness – the list goes on.

Today's readings feature the sea, and especially a turbulent sea. In the Bible, the sea represents primal chaos and later it stands for all that is wrong with the world, especially accidents, disasters and tragedies. So we see God in the Book of Job taming the ocean and confining it within set boundaries: "Thus far shall you come, and no further, and here shall your proud waves be stopped." Psalm 107 shows God quieting a storm at sea "so that the waves thereof are still." And today's gospel sees Jesus rebuking the wind and telling the sea: "Peace! Be still" and there was a dead calm. Magnificent passages, all of them.

Everything this morning is set against the background of the reading from Job. "Who is this?" booms God out of the whirlwind, or in other words, "How dare you?" or even these days in that grammatically dubious phrase, "How very dare you?" And then, "Gird up your loins!" I should jolly well think so, as the alternative is a quivering wreck in the face of such terrifying omnipotence. Throughout the Book of Job until this point there has been an inherent question as to why Job should have to suffer to such an agonising extent. As we might put it today, what has he done to deserve such terrible pain? The expectation is that God should justify himself in the face of such suffering – not just an innocent man who has done no wrong, but a man who has positively done good in his life. Why is he suffering? Job knows that God is righteous and that although he, Job, suffers, he also is righteous. But he does not know how these apparent contradictions can be reconciled. However, as one commentator says: "A moral principle does not govern the world." The world instead is governed by a mighty power that lies at the heart of everything – sea, storms, each one of us, everything. Despite the collect, we do lose sight of the things eternal and are swamped by the fear engendered by whichever current storm is the worst, and poor old Job was swamped over and over

again. God's question is, "How dare you obscure my purpose or plan when you don't know what you're talking about?" But this purpose or plan is only clear to God. Job cannot know it. We cannot know it. And that is probably where faith begins to crumble. We want to know. We want to see a pattern. Our constant quest for knowledge blinds us to the "things eternal", to God. Faith requires us to let go and trust in the eternal, omnipotent one that is God. All that Job can know at the end of the book is that he and his sufferings have their place in God's inscrutable design. Why should he or we seek to understand the mind of God? Finally, in childlike reverence Job acknowledges it to be far beyond him. Can we do the same?

On the strength of the other readings today, the answer is probably no; we are not good at acknowledging our ignorance and turning in faith to God. Psalm 107 shows abject terror in the face of a storm. "They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man: and are at their wit's end". This may well be allegorical of the Jewish nation whom God delivered from the stormy attacks of foreign nations, from bondage in Egypt and Babylon, restoring them to new life and health. God has rescued them over and over again, just as he rescues those "who go down to the sea in ships", only to be swamped by the stormy waters. Swamped by stormy waves, they inevitably lose sight of things eternal, lose sight of God their saviour and redeemer, and they give way to fear. In Mark's gospel, the disciples are being swamped in another boat as the gale blows and the waves rage, and Jesus sleeps happily through it all – on his cushion! Instead of "Why is this happening to us?" – the question behind the entire Book of Job – Jesus asks "Why are you afraid?" Storms happen. They are part of the world we live in. They are inevitable. Have faith..... That's all. But that is so very difficult....

The gospel story shows us that Jesus came to bring an end to the present evil epitomised by the sea, and especially by a storm at sea. It's so simple: faith is the opposite of fear. If you have faith, you won't be afraid; or the other way round, being afraid is the same as not believing. This story is saying that this one human being, Jesus, will be responsible for the total reconstruction of the universe, ushering in a kingdom where there will be no more disasters and no more chaos. The NT scholar, John Fenton, reminds us that when St Paul preached about Jesus to the Jews, the person Jesus proved to be a stumbling block. Jesus' fellow countrymen and women knew all about him and his family, but quite ridiculously, the more we know a person and about a person as one of us, the less we believe in him or her. They knew him: and yet they said, "Who can this be?" The Saviour needs to differ from those he saves. Faith, as Fenton says, needs to appreciate and depend on what is distinct. Jesus was one of them, one of us.

When I first started teaching religious studies a very, very long time ago, with no experience and no qualification other than being married to the vicar (which sadly is of absolutely no use when confronted by classes of recalcitrant boys) one of the only text books provided was entitled "From fear to faith". I clung to that book like a drowning man clinging to the mast of a sinking ship. It contrasted so-called primitive religions with, most specifically, Christianity, though it could just as easily have been Islam or Judaism. The book's claim was that more primitive people were constantly afraid; the world was a frightening place. So religion consisted of superstitious practices such as making sacrifices to appease the gods. Christianity, on the other hand preached faith and therefore an end to fear-based superstitions. Essentially the fear based superstitious rituals were bargains with God. We see the same thing today when in

films and novels, people apparently pray to God saying, “If you save me, my daughter/son/wife/husband I will always go to church/say my prayers/help out at the food bank” – whatever. Can you imagine entering into that kind of a bargain with the God of the Book of Job? He booms out of the whirlwind, “How dare you?” and the response is “Sorry, God. I won’t doubt you for a moment if you just stop all this pain and grief.” God is simply not like that. The world is simply not like that. As I said at the beginning, storms happen. But God is at the heart of those storms, just as he speaks in the midst of the whirlwind, just as Jesus is in the boat. We need to move from fear to faith. But very few of us do.

Look once more at today’s psalm. The storm arose, the sailors were terrified and cried to the Lord who in this instance put a stop to things. Then notice what the psalmist says: “O that men would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness.” In other words, those who are saved have not said thank you. In the gospel the disciples in the boat simply ask who in the world is this? Even when God does apparently save us we remain ungrateful. But Job in the end, acknowledges in childlike reverence, that God is far beyond him. That is what is required of us: childlike reverence in the face of an awe-inspiring God. We must “lose not our hold on things eternal” as the collect says. And that really is what St Paul says. He reminds the recalcitrant Corinthians that he, Paul, has endured every “storm” imaginable – beatings, imprisonment, sleepless nights – you name it – and now he is urging the Corinthians, as a father urges his children, that they must grab salvation with both hands NOW! Now is the time. So he speaks to us today, especially as we gripe about elections and that nobody’s worth voting for, to stop moaning, stand up and be counted, VOTE! Hang onto things eternal. SEE and believe that Jesus is right there in the mess with us, just as he was in the boat with the disciples.

And Paul's final words to us: "Open wide your hearts." Let go of all those negatives. Look for the eternal, right here in the world with us if only we have eyes to see. I finish with a prayer of Bishop John Taylor:

Lord Jesus Christ, alive and at large in the world,
help me to follow and find you there today,
in the places where I work, meet people, spend money, and make plans.
Take me as a disciple of your Kingdom, to see through your eyes
and hear the questions you are asking, to welcome all with trust and truth,
and to change the things that contradict God's love
by the power of your cross and the freedom of your spirit. Amen.