



Parish Communion on the Fourth Sunday after Trinity, 2024

Job 38.1-11. 2 Corinthians 6.1-13. Mark 4.35-end

'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the twelfth century, archdeacon Henry of Huntingdon wrote down the now legendary story of King Canute and the waves. Canute, or Knuðr, was the Viking king who had conquered England in the early eleventh century. He was also king of Denmark and Norway, and briefly conquered Scotland as well. With all this power, Canute's nobles thought he could do no wrong. He must be omnipotent.

Henry tells the story of how Canute had his throne carried down to the tideline on the beach. He sat in it, and with a loud voice commanded the sea to turn back. His nobles watched, holding their breath. Surely now they would have proof of their king's amazing, supernatural power.

Of course, the sea did not turn back. Canute got his feet wet, as he had known all along he would. And according to Henry, the king then cast off his crown, saying: 'Let all men know how worthless is the power of kings! There is no one worthy of the name but He whom heaven, earth, and sea obey by eternal laws.'

Henry of Huntingdon's story was meant to remind his readers that earthly, political power is as nothing compared with the power of God. It's also sadly apocryphal. The real Knuðr was a fighter and a chancer who failed to divorce his first wife before marrying the second. He sent her off to rule Norway instead. Not quite the pious and holy king of legend, after all. But it's a good story, and it makes a good point, which I want to explore today.

Like the story of King Canute, our readings today from the Old Testament and the Gospel are about the sea and the power of God. Job 38 is the beginning of the Theophany: the awesome appearance of God in a whirlwind, after thirty-seven chapters of distress, despair and petty arguing. Job is utterly destitute, bereft of his family and goods, afflicted by disease. He refuses to curse God, but continues to proclaim that he himself is righteous. His cry to the Lord is 'Why?' It's a question most of us have asked at some point, and continue to ask as we look at the world around us. Why do terrible things happen to innocent people?

And God's answer, in this oldest of the books of the Hebrew Bible, is not immediately comforting. What God says to Job, effectively, is: what do you know about it? 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' the Lord asks Job. Were you there when I set the

boundaries of the sea? Do you know who said ‘thus far shall you come and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped?’

We should pause at this last question. Because the answer is obvious. Does Job know who created the world? asks the Lord. The answer is obviously ‘You did. You just said so.’

But does Job **know** who created the world? Does he truly, fully understand who it is that is talking to him? Does he understand who and what God is, what He has done and will do, his motivations, his heart? Does he understand God’s care for everything that He has created – not just Job, not just humanity, but as the next three chapters show, everything from stars to sea-monsters, animals and birds, heaven and hell?

Just as there are limits to human power, to the power of kings, so there are limits to the human power of understanding. We do not and cannot fully understand God. We are separated from Him in this life, and the separation is painful, especially when it looks like He is ignoring our suffering.

Our gospel reading picks up the same theme. ‘Teacher’ say the disciples to Jesus ‘do you not care that we are perishing?’ Jesus wakes up and stills the storm, shouting into the wind with a loud voice. And the wind and the waves obey him. But then Jesus asks the disciples a question. ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ This time, the ‘why’ comes from God to humankind. Job asked God why he allowed him to suffer so much. Jesus asks the disciples why they allow themselves to have so little faith. Even had the waves overcome the boat and all perished, would Jesus have deserted them? No. God is with them in spirit as well as in body.

This can be hard to take. And we should guard against misinterpretation. Our stories today are **not** telling us that faith is all that is required for healing, for the cessation of suffering. They are certainly not telling us that if we continue to suffer, it is due to a lack of faith. I want to make that very clear.

As humans, we are not really capable of holding the depth of God’s care for us, individually and collectively, with the breadth of his care for all creation, with his timelessness and eternity. The temptation is either to try to domesticate God, to mould Him into something we can understand and manipulate, or to become God: to command the wind and the waves. But both of these are an illusion.

Later on in Job 41, the Lord reminds Job that he cannot hope to reckon even with some of the earthly things that God has made. ‘Can you draw out Leviathan with a fish-hook...will it speak soft words to you? Can you play with it as a bird?’ Of course Job can’t. And if there are creatures and planets and aspects of the universe that God has made that we cannot hope to control, can we then realistically expect to control the natural world; the behaviour of other humans; all the things that contribute to suffering? Can we expect to direct the actions of God himself, to our own earthly benefit? As C.S. Lewis put it: ‘He’s not a **tame** lion.’

We do not and cannot fully understand God. We are separated from Him in this life, and the separation is painful. It means we do not see Him face to face; we cannot understand why He

allows many things to happen. Even if we encountered Him incarnate now, as the disciples did, would we truly understand? That full understanding may be reserved for the time when we stand before the throne of grace. No-one, in this world, can look upon the face of God and live. No one in this world has ever seen God, but God the Only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, has made him known to us.

And this is the gift we are given, as St Paul reminds us: that despite all the hardships we endure, we have the assurance of salvation. God has been made known to us through Christ, and the assurance that we will one day be righteous in his sight: able to stand in his presence and live, to participate in his eternal glory. That is what God has given us in Jesus. 'I urge you not to accept the grace of God in vain' says Paul. In other words, don't accept the grace of God only as long as things are going your way. Don't attempt to prove or disprove the existence of God based on the good or bad things happening in your particular corner of spacetime. Don't let the openness or otherwise of your heart to God be based on the amount of faith you can summon up at any given time. Be as open to God as a child, whatever is going on inside or around you.

The assurance of salvation is the promise God has given to us, as human beings. It's not always comfortable living up to it or into it. It's not the assurance of an easy life, or a feeling of superiority over our neighbours. It requires of us effort towards those virtues St Paul so loved: 'purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech.' And as at the end of that list: it also requires faith in the power of God. Not full understanding of **how** God will deliver on his promise, just open hearts and a little bit of faith that he can and will do so in the end, whatever hardships we endure in the meantime.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Revd Nell Whiscombe
Curate, St John the Evangelist Church Cambridge
23 June 2024