



Sermon at St John the Evangelist, Sunday 23rd June 2024

Some words from a book that I love, by one Ian Adams, an Anglican priest, writer & new monastic pioneer, as well as a member of staff at Ridley Hall...

‘Where do you go when the tidal wave of stuff coming your way threatens to break on you, and consume you? Where do you go when the mad accumulation of debris in your head, begins to block all entry and exit points? When do you go when you need to discover that you are loved, and to hear again – as the great medieval English contemplative Mother Julian of Norwich reminds us – that ‘all shall be well?’

The story of Jesus and his disciples in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, in Mark, is one of those parables – and yes, I call it a parable, even though it was also a real event, because it’s full of symbolism – rich with meaning, for our lives today. For we all know the reality, of this kind of overwhelming (represented by the waves), and what it feels like in our lives. The sense, at certain moments – whether expected or not – of being overcome by forces way beyond our control.

Forces physical or emotional, psychological or spiritual, which simply terrify and paralyse us, such that we are unable to see a way forward...

Forces which can, yes, be evil; but can also be natural, or even benign, but simply – at a particular moment in our lives – more than we can cope with.

In his Lent book, ‘The Shape of Living’, written some years ago, Professor David Ford broadens the definition of such forces, when he identifies the ‘multiple overwhelming-s’ of modern life: the images and information which constantly inundate us and pervade our lives; at any point risking, for many, a different kind of overwhelming, as we contend with the subtle impact of messages, coming at us, from all directions – often subliminally, and influencing how we think or feel, whether we like it or not. This too is part of our contemporary overwhelming: of a different kind than that experienced by Jesus & his disciples, on the Sea of Galilee, but no less real.

For the disciples, out on the Sea, at one moment there is calm, and order and control...

and the next moment a great gale arises, the waves are whipped up, and before they know where they are, the boat is being swamped, and they fear that their very lives are at risk. And where is Jesus? Asleep in the stern, his head on a cushion, as if oblivious to what is happening. A still centre in the eye of the storm, to whom they turn in their panic and confusion: ‘Teacher, do you not care, we are perishing?’

And what does Jesus do? He awakes, rebukes the wind and says to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ And the wind ceases, and there is a dead calm.

I find it one of the most powerful episodes in the whole of the NT, as it demonstrates, in the context of the overwhelming of the storm – and all that threatens to overwhelm our lives – the

power of Jesus, the living Word, to bring peace and healing and refreshment (whether outwardly, in the physical forces of our lives; which, most of the time, we can't control) (or inwardly, in our hearts and minds and relationships).

Yes, Jesus has the power, and – in the end, however long it takes to get there, and however much love & support or professional help we might need – God is in control, in Him there is peace, and (one day) 'all shall be well'.

And alongside the power of Jesus to bring good out of evil, order out of chaos, and light out of darkness, I also find that this parable reminds us that there are, for all of us, alongside the places & times of overwhelming, and suffering, and loss and struggle, 'places' or inner landscapes of stillness and refreshment, and peace, which we can also choose to identify with or inhabit – whether outer physical landscapes, or an inner dispositions of the heart. What, ultimately, we experience in prayer and contemplation, namely that inner space of stillness and silence, and searching, wherein we are invited to discover the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and to live out of this abundant wellspring.

A wellspring which (like Jesus in the stern of the boat) can provide hope - even in the midst of hard times... A peace which the world can never give...

For Elijah, in our first reading, the circumstances were very different – he was facing human principalities and powers, rather than natural forces, at least at the outset (the wrath of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel). But the outcome was no less profound, as Elijah discovered the living presence of God, ministering to him, not in awesome displays of earthquake, wind and fire, but in the 'still small voice of calm' - a desert space of encounter and contemplation.

An experience which comes to Elijah, not immediately, but after a dramatic 40 day pilgrimage into the wilderness, escaping the demons that had tormented him. How often, after particular times of crisis in our lives, we need that Lenten journey of withdrawal and solitude, in order to rediscover God's presence, in the desert spaces of the heart.

A couple of months ago I had the privilege of attending a conference in one such place for me, Launde Abbey – a beautiful oasis of peace and contemplation, in the heart of rural Leicestershire. It was a national conference for Diocesan Spirituality Advisers, of which I am one, in my spare time!

But what spoke to me, even more than the excellent training material, was the landscape, the hills and lakes, a deep well – just outside our guest house – and the atmospheric medieval Chapel, where we gathered for contemplation early each morning.

For we all need, I believe, such places – such still points – where we can go, in order to find, like Elijah, and like the disciples, the still small voice of calm. And yet such places are not only physical – although, of course, quiet days, retreats and holidays help, when we can get there – but spiritual also: the places and spaces of our hearts.

For this is what prayer and contemplation, at root, is:

taking time, apart, in our busy lives, to simply be in the presence of God, who is being and love and communion, Himself. Taking time out to rest a while, from our weary, and at times overwhelming lives, to return to God's living presence – and to imbibe his presence and peace. An inner landscape of stillness and silence & searching, a Sabbath-space, alongside the places & times of overload & wild forces beyond our control...

An experience and discipline that we need, to sustain and direct us, in uncertain times, although it's a living stream we're invited to inhabit at all times and in all places, by the Holy Spirit of God: Jesus Christ, the living word, abiding in the depths of each one of us, however turbulent the sail boat of our own lives. For as one writers on prayer puts it,

'Communion with God in the silence of the heart is a God-given capacity,

like the rhododendron's capacity to flower, the fledgling's for flight, and the child for self-forgetful abandon and joy.'

And let me end with the majestic words of John Greenleaf Whittier's hymn - which draw on both our Gospel and the journey of Elijah; words which we can make our own – as we seek that peace, in the overwhelming of our lives; God's peace, which surpasses all understanding:

O Sabbath rest by Galilee,
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love!

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.
Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm;
O still, small voice of calm.

Amen

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