

Sermon St Swithuns Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2021

Mark 4: 35-41 Why are you Afraid?

*On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'*

If you hear screams coming from the Vicarage, should you be worried?

I kind of hope that you might take the trouble to check that there is not an armed intruder. However, you can probably walk on by unconcerned, because it is much more likely to be a mouse.

The Vicarage is an old house and old houses have mice.

Houses with mice frequently have a cat to help deal with the problem.

Juliet and I have Whisky (a cat) and, yes, she more or less has the mice under control. However, part of her technique for keeping the mice down is to play with them for hours and then leave them, when dead, in unexpected places. Either way, discovering a mouse either scurrying for cover or dead in your shoe is likely to raise a shriek in our house.

It is an irrational fear, of course. Would anyone really say that mice, or spiders, or birds (for example) are the thing they most fear. Surely there are more tangible things that we are afraid of.

What are you afraid of?

In our Gospel reading we heard about real fear. The disciples, Jesus' friends, were terrified. I would like us to think a little about that fear and what we can learn for our lives as Jesus' friends today.

The disciples had every reason to be afraid. This was not a mouse or spider fear. They feared for their lives when their boat was caught in a sudden and totally unexpected storm.

The Sea of Galilee is prone to sudden storms. This is because of the geography. The lake lies in a cup of land, well below normal sea level, with high mountains all around. The rivers and streams that feed into the lake have carved deep valleys and gorges into the land and it is down these gullies that wind can be funnelled resulting in storms. The

weather plays a part too, with the intense heat of the middle east creating the conditions where the winds can arise very suddenly.

However, on this evening, there would have been low risk of a storm. The air was cooling down and anyway, there were at least four experienced fishermen in the group. When Jesus said “lets go across to the other side” everyone must have decided it was fine. So much so that several other boats set sail too.

When the storm hit, it was completely unexpected. The writer of Mark’s Gospel makes sure we understand that the situation was very serious indeed. The experienced sailors had no answer for the fury of the storm and the crashing of the waves. They must have been terrified.

But Jesus was asleep through it all.

So they woke him up: “Teacher, don’t you care that we are perishing?”

As we heard, Jesus with a few words commanded the storm to cease, and that is exactly what happened. So that there was a dead calm on the sea.

Storms can hit us in our lives totally unexpectedly.

An accident, a serious diagnosis, redundancy, being a victim of a crime, a sudden death.

And sometimes we can see the storm coming.

A relationship breakdown, a habit heading for addiction, early signs of dementia.

How do we respond when we face storms in our lives?

Have you ever asked “Jesus, don’t you care that I am being overwhelmed in this”?

The Bible has lots of examples of people who cry out to God in just this way. “Why are you letting this happen to me?” The book of Psalms has many examples.

It is an authentic human response and prayer.

Jesus himself prayed in this way “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”.

A life committed to God is not a guarantee that we will be insulated from troubles in our earthly lives.

For the disciples, having Jesus with them in the boat did not prevent the storm hitting.

And having Jesus with them did not stop them being frightened in the storm. Jesus was asleep! The least he could have done was join in the panic and help stop the boat sinking.

Have you ever wondered where God has gone, just when you need help most?

Oh, yes.

The disciples cried out to Jesus in the middle of their troubles because they had no other options. It struck me that their prayer at that moment saved not only their lives but the lives of the sailors and passengers in those other boats.

Those of us that travel with Jesus have a ministry to ask for help not only for our own troubles but also the needs of others.

The storm ceased, and the sea became completely calm.

It is easy to get the impression that Jesus was irritated by the disciples, for waking him, for accusing him of not caring for them or irritated because they were afraid. As I have thought about this famous story again, I do not think that Jesus was irritated.

The disciples had done the right thing. They had asked him for help. Jesus had answered and now everything was ok.

What Jesus did ask is “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

I don't hear a rebuke or disappointment in these words. The disciples were learning. Their faith was getting there. They were still getting their heads around who it was that they were following.

Of course they had been afraid but if they had truly grasped beforehand who Jesus was, might having him in the boat with them have made them less afraid? Perhaps they might have asked for help sooner.

The Bible has lots to say about fear and about God's ability to help us overcome fear.

“God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46)

“So do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you... (Isaiah 41:10)

“Do not be anxious about anything but... present your prayers to God; and the peace of God... will transform your hearts and minds...” (Philippians 4:6, 7)

I don't think Jesus really expected that his friends should not have been afraid in the middle of the storm. But if they had only grasped who it was that they had with them in the boat, they might have felt less fearful.

When we face our fears and troubles in life, we do so in partnership with this same Jesus. We are not alone and our God is not about rejecting us when we call for help.

Jesus does not deliver us from storms but he is able to deliver us through all of life's troubles.

One other thing I want us to notice in what Jesus said to his friends was this. He didn't say “why were you afraid?”. Jesus asked them “why are you afraid?”.

Mark writes that the disciples were frightened not only before but after Jesus calmed the storm. We read they were “filled with great awe” but in other translations words such as “terrified” are used.

I think they were terrified because they realised that Jesus was someone much greater than they had previously thought. Surely only Godself had power over the elements like wind and waves.

God was in their boat and they were frightened.

It is true that there is a huge and frightening gulf between God: all-powerful, creator and completely holy... and people like us. Faced with the awesome presence and power of God, I think anyone would expect to be terrified.

However, in Jesus we see the truth not only of God's power and holiness but most particularly we see God's perfect love. Love for the disciples. Love for the people in all of the other boats and love for all people.

The essence of God's nature and attitude towards all of creation is love, not fear.

The disciples were learning and had not yet fully grasped who it was in their boat. We have the full picture of who Jesus was and is, but we are learning too.

"The fear of God" is a phrase that is used, sometimes badly and sometimes in a trite manner.

Jesus shows us that our relationship with God is not about fear.

Why are you afraid?

If we only could grasp the full wonder of who it is that is with us on our journey.

With Jesus travelling with us, we need have no fear of God, or of anything else.

God does not sleep and God will deliver us through the storms.

There is no fear in Love. But perfect love drives out fear. (1John 4:18)