

The reading is taken from Mark 4:35-41. I'm going to read it and then I'm going to hand over to Anna.

{Reading Mark 4:35-41}

Well, I've certainly got the weather for the passage I'm preaching on today! It's snowy, it's been pouring outside, I've seen it pouring outside still, and I think I've got the weather to match the sermon this morning.

So I just want to start by asking you to think about a time when you have been frightened, or worried, or anxious, or confused. This might be a memory from your childhood. It might be a memory concerning a close family member. It might be a more resent one. And I want you to think about how that fear or anxiety was solved or relived.

The fishermen were terrified: the boat was being thrown all over the place (which happens on the sea of Galilee) and they were in real danger – don't make any mistake, they were in genuine real danger of losing their lives – and here was Jesus lying in the back of the boat asleep on a pillow, seemingly oblivious to what was going on around him to the storm that had ensured all around him. The Sea of Galilee is a very dangerous place even in today's world, and it isn't just boats that are in danger: the car parks on the Western shore have signs warning drivers of what happens in high winds – the sea can get very rough very quickly, and big waves can swamp cars on what looked like a safe beach – and boats if they are in the sea they get tossed around, like a child's toy.

The section that Steve read for me is a very well known section of Mark's gospel that many of you will have known since Sunday School and like many of these familiar passages it can be over simplified, and the full meaning is lost. And this really is the case in this passage. You see, for Jewish readers, or listeners, this event (or this story) would have had echoes of several Old Testament passages and their associated meanings.

The first one to think about is Jonah's story: God told him to go one place, Jonah went the opposite way and he found himself in a boat, in a ship, (a bit like the disciples) in a storm being thrown around, the sailors genuinely fearing for their lives. And then at Jonah's insistence they threw him overboard, and, if course, you know the story, he got swallowed by a whale and he basically ended up where God intended him to be, and the people of Nineveh were saved. That's the first story that this passage would have referred to.

The we have the story of the Israelites, or the Jewish people, coming out of Egypt and of course they walked through the sea. We have that wonderful story where the sea parted and they had a path to walk through to the other side to safety and out of Egypt.

Going further back to Creation we have the new order and the new world, and it emerge from the dark primal sea. And quite early on in the creation story we read how God separated the atmosphere into two levels: one was the sea and one was the air.

And, of course, we mustn't forget the Psalms that have frequent references to creator God ruling the raging seas, telling the waves to quieten down. And they are scattered right through the Psalms this God being ruler over the seas and the waves and elements of the weather.

Now the Jewish people were not a seafaring people – they left that to the neighbouring nations

around them. They really were not a seafaring nation; ok they did go out and fish, but that's it – they weren't interested in going and exploring, and finding land overseas, or anything, they were very much a land dwelling nation, they were very much into farming and that kind of thing rather than the sea. And so for them, the sea came to symbolise the dark power of evil that threatened to destroy God's good creation, and God's people and purpose. And we see in the book of Daniel the sea is where the monsters live – stuff of nightmares really. So, as you can see, the sea for the Jewish people was not looked upon favourably; they certainly weren't interested in getting on a nice yacht (like a lot of millionaires are today) and going off for a sail on the sea – they regarded the sea as almost somewhere to be avoided, to be quite honest.

And this event shows God's power being unleashed and God's kingdom is at hand. It is not the kind of kingdom you would expect but it is real. It is the same power that created the earth and that power is with them in Jesus – he is the real deal. You see, when Christ came he brought in God's kingdom; now not the full kingdom as we are waiting for (that's going to come later), but he did bring in the kingdom. It's a kind of "it's here, but it's not here". The way to describe this is I remember when we were waiting for the iPad to come out. We knew it existed: Apple were doing their amazing marketing strategy where they were starting to advertise the wonderful things this iPad was going to do, and what you would be able to do with it, how you could store photos on it, do word processing, and they build up this great frenzy of excitement: the iPad had arrived, it was here, it existed, but it hadn't quite made it into the shops yet, they hadn't released it into the shops – the full coming was yet to come. And God's kingdom is a little bit like that: it's at the amazing marketing stage – it's here, it's around us but it's not come in full force yet.

What Jesus did was to act as God's agent, acting in the chaos. So he arrived in the world, it was a bit chaotic and, you know, he came, he started acting. And Jesus, to go back to our story, is so confident of his father's presence and power that he fell asleep on a pillow., even though the storm was whistling all around him. And the disciples are cross. They're cross about Jesus' apparent lack of concern, but Jesus, instead, does one of his usual clever things – he reverses the question by asking them if they have faith. Do you have faith in this situation? Do you have faith we will get out of it, or survive this?

Jesus was so confident of his power and purpose that he went to die, that he went to the cross to die. Of course, only to rise to life again three days later. It wasn't an accident that Jesus went to the cross – he knew exactly what he was doing when he did that, and he voluntarily did it and went to the cross. And, of course, in a few months time we'll be hearing a lot more about that as we go into Easter. And it asks the question: do we have faith?

Off course at the moment it is not the sea that is posing the greatest danger to people living in the UK today. For most of us it is COVID-19. We watch our television screens, we see the hospitals struggling to cope, we see how many people have been tested positive that day, and sadly how many people have actually died that day. And we think of those families that have been left behind, bereaved and grieving.

Now, it is very easy to read stories like the one we have before us today and think that life was very rosy for the disciples. Here they were walking around with Jesus, watching all the miracles – what a great time: walking around, watching all these miracles, watching the sick being healed and people being released from demons...yeah, great life!

They followed Jesus during his time on earth; they had the excitement of seeing him rising from the dead – ok, yes, they did have the horrible three days while they had to wait for it – but they

had fantastic ministries themselves., they went on to have huge ministries themselves.

But the truth is very different. They lived in a very dangerous time. We know that the Romans had occupied Palestine, and you had to be careful; the disciples had to be incredibly careful what they did: it was a very dangerous time. And they faced constant danger and economic hardship; they weren't paid for the work they did for their ministries. We know that Paul was a tent maker, Paul had to earn his money, unlike today when we pay Steve his stipend every month, and that allows him and his family to survive, which allows Steve to devote his time full time to the church – they didn't have that then, if they were a missionary they had to fund themselves.

They faced persecution. The Romans towards the end really didn't like Jesus, and neither did the Jewish leaders – in fact nobody liked Jesus and that meant they didn't really like the disciples either. And we know through history and tradition that most of the disciples had a violent and unpleasant death. We know one exception, of course, who was John, who we know lived to be very elderly but was kept prisoner on the isle of Patmos. But that's unusual: most of the disciples died in really quite a horrible way.

And life is not always rosy for us either. Steve has already mentioned some of the issues that are going on in our local community. I've heard that Croydon University Hospital has actually had to transfer quite a number of people to other hospitals, it's very near the point of being completely overwhelmed actually, as well as having to shut its A&E. I think they are actually really struggling at Croydon University Hospital at the moment. And the Coronavirus has killed spirit filled, vibrant Christians, and it's left their families grief stricken – this has affected Christians. They haven't been left off, and, of course, for the church there's going to be economical considerations soon because church incomes have fallen. There's a lot going on that isn't good.

But the disciples had the faith to believe that Christ's Kingdom would fully come at its appointed time. Through all of the struggles, and the hardship, and the persecution, and the difficulties that they face, they knew that the kingdom would fully come at its appointed time (just as the iPad was eventually released into the shops and people were able to go out and buy one).

We may be facing danger from a microscopic virus (or other dangers – we've already heard people have lost their jobs, there's economic hardship going on, there's all the worry of the schools being shut, there's all sorts of things that are worrying people at the moment, but a lot of it has been caused unfortunately by the virus) but do we have faith to believe that Christ is in charge? Despite all the chaos that's going on around us, despite the fact that we see the local hospital in danger of being overwhelmed, despite the fact that we see on our tellies the number's going up and the number of deaths, do we have faith to believe that Christ is in charge?

Do we believe that Christ's Kingdom will fully come at its appointed time? I'm going to leave that question with you.

Do we have faith to see beyond the current situation to a time when there is no danger, or illness, or pain? To a time when we walk with Jesus and can bask in his eternal love – do we? Do we have that kind of faith?

As I finish, know that Christ's power can never, never, be taken away – it is eternal and his love for you will never end. We like the disciples await the day when Christ's kingdom fully comes. We do not need to fear. We await that day.

Amen