

“OUT IN THE STORM (Mark 14)”
Mark 4:35-41

It's probably a fairly safe bet that most of us here this morning have been out in a boat at some time in our lives. It may have been something as small as a kayak or you may have been fortunate enough to travel on a cruise liner – or some of you on a large Royal Navy vessel. Probably the most used form of transport amongst us here would be a cross-Channel ferry. I've travelled on them many times across to Holland, Belgium and France, usually with no ill effects. But there have been occasions when it has been fairly hairy. I remember on one crossing from Dunkirk to Ramsgate the wind was so fierce that almost everyone on board was actually lying down on the floor. The bottles were falling off the shelves in the Duty Free Shop, the few people who could stomach any food found it slid off the tables in the restaurant, and every toilet, washbasin and litter bin was awash with the work of those who couldn't stomach any food. And when there's a storm in the Channel, it seems that the crews like to keep you out at sea for an extra hour or two just to make sure you get the full benefit of the elements. We bobbed about outside Ramsgate harbour for an extra hour and a half while the captain tried to line the ship up with the entrance.

And that was a big boat – not as big as a cruise liner, but certainly much bigger than the boat Jesus and his followers were in out on the Sea of Galilee. That Sea – or lake, as we should really call it – is surrounded by hills. The rivers flow into the lake down fairly deep valleys which act as channels for any wind, concentrating the force of the wind and blasting the lake itself with what Mark calls here “*furious squalls*.” On this occasion it must have been a particularly powerful squall because the disciples, who were all pretty experienced fishermen and spent most of their life out on the lake, were worried that they were going to drown.

The boat they were in – a fairly small fishing boat not much bigger than some of the boats you see on the canals around here – was the one into which Jesus had climbed at the beginning of this chapter. You'll remember (or you can look back and read) that as Jesus was talking to the people down on the beach, the crowd had grown so large that he had to get into a nearby boat and shout to them from a few yards off shore (4:1). The last couple of times we looked at Mark's story of Jesus' life we considered the stories that he told them from the boat – some of the “parables” by which he tried to communicate something about the new Kingdom that he was inaugurating. As the day drew to a close, he felt the need to leave the crowds and sail over the other side of the lake, the eastern shore, where he could perhaps find a bit of peace and quiet for a little while.

And as they cross over the lake, this storm blows up, providing Mark with a point of transition in his story from the teaching that Jesus has given – the **words** about the Kingdom – to a short series of miracles which he performs – the **acts** of the Kingdom. It's as if the time has come for Mark to show that Jesus' actions vindicate his words. He is able, in the current irritating vernacular, to “walk the talk”. Between the parables and the healings comes this short story of the storm, a miracle in itself. Mark's description of the storm itself isn't terribly long or detailed. And the dialogue is pretty sparse, too. In fact, the conversation that goes on basically consists of three questions. Let's use them as a framework for what we have to say today.

1. “DON'T YOU CARE?” (v38)

This is a real cry for help. What on earth is this man doing? It was his idea to set off across the lake and now this storm has come up, a storm of such ferocity that it looks as if the boat is going to sink. And what's Jesus doing? Helping them to bail out? Offering them words of encouragement? Getting stuck in hauling the sails? No: he's asleep. Back there in the stern, with his head on the little leather seat that the steersman usually uses, he is dead to the world. How can he do it?

But above the roar of the wind and the crash of the waves, the disciples let him know what they think of him. “It looks like we’re going to drown. Don’t you care?” Some of the people who have written about this story seem to think that this is a sign of terrible rudeness on the part of the disciples – it’s just not on that these men should speak like this to the Son of God. Well, there do appear to be some mitigating circumstances don’t there? Firstly, they’re in a situation of some extremity and people aren’t always at their politest in such circumstances. Anyone who’s sat with a woman who’s giving birth will know that! Secondly, they don’t actually know that he’s the Son of God at this point. Yes, they know he’s someone special, but as far as his actually being divine, well the talk about that is yet to come.

In fact, even if they did recognise him as God, there is a long tradition in the Hebrew scriptures of men and women speaking to God like this. Some of the prophets were not averse to giving God a bit of an earful about his apparent reluctance to do anything. Look at what Habakkuk says (*Habakkuk 1:2a*). And there’s plenty of it in the *Psalms*. In *Psalms 44:23,24* the writer there even believes that God is asleep!

So here they are, in the middle of this storm – a crisis that could actually mean death for these men – and Jesus doesn’t seem to be the least bit bothered. They think he doesn’t care and upbraid him for it. He is asleep when they most need him, ignorant of their plight and just doing his own thing. Why shouldn’t they be annoyed? They certainly don’t have any idea of what is going to happen next.

Having been woken up, Jesus shouts at the elements. As usual, the writers of these stories don’t give us any clue as to the tone of voice used or the way in which the words were spoken, but I suspect that, having been tired out by his contact with the crowds and now having been woken abruptly and somewhat rudely by his friends, Jesus was not in the best of moods and got rather irritated with the wind and rain. His tone was probably rather fractious. But his words are interesting, especially if you know where he used them before. The words translated “*Quiet!*” here is actually the same as the word in *1:25* translated “*Be quiet!*”, which you will see was addressed to a demon and is literally translated as “*Be muzzled!*”

This act of calming the storm is a Kingdom act. It is a miracle that shows something of the power of God over every part of creation. The new age that Jesus is inaugurating, the fulfilment of the glad tidings, the “gospel” of the prophets, is one in which all things will work together as intended by God. No more storms. No more fear. No more disruption of the good ordering of his creation. The peoples of the Middle East had long considered the sea to be an uncontrollable element, a metaphor for chaos. Right at the beginning of the account of creation, God brings order out of the brooding deep. Chaos reigns while there is just the formless deep water over which the Spirit hovers. Part of the point of this story is that Jesus comes to demonstrate God’s sovereignty over the forces of evil, the forces of chaos. So whether we take the sea as a metaphor for evil or the storm as a metaphor for crisis, Jesus comes to demonstrate that he has control, he can muzzle the jaws of despair. And as he does so, he poses the second of our questions.

2. **“DO YOU HAVE NO FAITH YET?”** (v40)

Now, although there’s still a lot of the story of Jesus’ life to go, the disciples have already had some opportunity of seeing how he works at close hand. And they’ve heard some of his teaching in which, while he hasn’t said anything really explicit about it, he has nonetheless hinted at the fact that he is the Son of God. They have heard him arguing with the leaders of the religious establishment about matters to do with the Law and so on – and each time he has reduced them to silence with the authority of his answers. They have seen him heal and exorcise, have witnessed withered limbs fleshing out and moving again, have heard the screams of departing demons. But they haven’t quite put two and two together and seen that this man is someone unique who can be relied on to ensure that right prevails in every circumstance.

So why can't they trust him to sort things out? What terrible, unbelieving ignoramuses they are? But just put yourself in their position. It's not necessarily that they don't believe Jesus can do it: they just don't see how he can do it in his sleep! I do actually think Jesus is a bit harsh on them here, but he still poses the question and seems to think that they do need to be far more trusting, far more sure of their faith that things will be sorted out in the end. They need to be more aware that faith in Jesus is a quiet faith that does not need to panic, even when humanly speaking they cannot see what the way out of the situation is.

But it has a powerful effect on the disciples. The storm disappears and the lake returns to its usual gentle lapping. The clouds scatter and the evening sun begins to shine through again. They have seen Jesus stand up and do all that through the power of his words. And now they hear his gentle rebuke as he challenges them about their faith in his person and power. At this point, Mark tells us they are "*terrified*" – not during the storm itself, but now, as they see the awesome power of Jesus at work. Suddenly they are confronted with the challenge of sorting out their own attitude to him. And the third question is posed.

3. **"WHO IS THIS?"** (v41)

They have never witnessed anything like this before. What kind of person is this who can be asleep one moment and then calm a powerful storm the next? Well, Mark's story draws together the two things that he is so eager to highlight all through this account of Jesus' life. This is someone who is both man and God.

a) **Human**

Mark shows us the humanity, the vulnerability of Jesus. He has had a hard day talking with the crowds and, no doubt, doing a bit of healing too. He wants a break. He needs to go somewhere quiet and unwind. That's why he wants to move away across the lake. And there must have been a real element of fatigue in all this because he lies down to rest in the boat and falls asleep during a storm which freaks out even the veterans of the lake. You'll all recognise that kind of tiredness, that inability to go on. And some of you may have slept that deeply that you have been totally unaware of what was going on around. We probably weren't as tired as Jesus, but I can remember that Sally and I slept through the great hurricane of 1987, and there were people who slept through the earthquake earlier last year. It's only human.

But the kind of ability to sleep soundly through times of crisis is, in the Bible, often a mark of someone's peace with God. There are several examples in the Hebrew scriptures, again. Look at *Proverbs 3:23,24* or at *Psalms 4:8*. Those who can sleep in peace are those who have a complete trust in God. Jesus was human – that's obvious from this and many other places. But he was also very much at one with God. Which isn't too surprising really, as he **was** God.

b) **Divine**

Once Jesus was stirred from his sleep, he showed his magisterial deity. It only need a couple of words and the force of the storm was rendered impotent. The winds died down. The waves subsided. This was a man who spoke, but not just a man. This was God in human form, demonstrating his dominion over creation. This is what Paul is driving at in his description of Jesus in *Colossians 1:16,17*. As we've already said, the disciples haven't quite cottoned on yet – but they will, and so will countless millions of people in the intervening centuries. "*Meekness and majesty, manhood and deity, in perfect harmony, the man who is God ... Oh, what a mystery.*"

This is Jesus, God and man. He is in total control of the situation, perfectly able to exercise his sovereignty over all things. But he is not doing it from some point outside the situation: he is there in it, there with his disciples in the very heart of the storm. He has it all sorted out and he is with them to let them know that, yes, he does care.

So which of those three questions is most pertinent to you this morning. Which one are you asking? Or do you hear Jesus, through his Holy Spirit, asking a question of you? That may depend on your current situation. It may depend on where you are on your journey of faith.

Are you struggling at the moment? For you the storm is a metaphor – as it so often is – for your situation at present. You are having to cope with one of the storms of life. You thought, like these disciples, that you knew how to cope. After all, they were experienced fishermen, they'd been through storms before, they had their expertise and their knowledge of the lake. And you thought you could cope. But just now it's all gone pear-shaped and all those years of trusting in God and hoping that he'd see you through don't seem to be helping. With what little faith you've got that God might be listening, you are screaming out **“Don't you care?”**

I cannot say anything to you this morning other than, yes, he does care. He might seem to have a strange way of showing it, but he does care and in the end it will all turn out for the best. And he's in it with you. Just as Jesus was actually in the boat with the disciples, actually in the heart of the storm, so God is there with you now. There's really nothing else to do, other than trust and keep on shouting.

But maybe you're one of those of whom Jesus is asking the question. He is saying to you, **“Do you still have no faith?”** You've been coming along here for months, years – or you've been looking around other places, reading, listening, trying to piece it all together. You've sat through countless sermons, read through all or part of the Bible, you even call yourself a Christian – but it actually makes no difference, because you haven't fully committed to him yet. How long are you going to go on like that? How long are you going to keep watching, listening, reading without taking that step of faith? Once again this morning God, through his Holy Spirit, is calling out to you to make up your mind and it's about time you did. Again, I've got nothing other to say to you than **“Get on and make your mind up?”**

Finally, you may well be asking the question the disciples asked themselves: **“Who is this?”** You've heard a bit about this man Jesus, you've seen that he has had some kind of effect on the lives of other people, but you're not really sure what it's all about. You're interested, but not yet ready to commit. You want to find out a bit more. Well, there's plenty of opportunity. Read through the rest of this book of Mark. Talk to someone you know who is a Christian. Try to come along here each Sunday and follow what we're saying about Jesus week by week. Or sign up for an Alpha course: it's an informal discussion group for people who want to find out about Jesus and life.

What's your question, then? More to the point, what are you going to do about it?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why does it sometimes appear to us that God doesn't care?
2. Jesus seemed to respond to the disciples “on demand”. Does God still do that? Why/why not?
3. Do you think the disciples should have had more faith by this point? Why/why not?
4. Why does Mark mention that they were terrified only **after** the storm?
5. How would you answer the question “Who is this?” Does it matter?
6. People seem to accept “nature” miracles (like this one) less readily than healing miracles. Why do you think that is?

7. What is the main thing you have learned from this passage?