

## Trust Mark 4 verses 35 to end

A couple of years ago now Marilyn and I were lucky enough to have a holiday in New Zealand. When in the town of Rotorua, on North Island, she found this brochure for something called “Rotorua Canopy Tours” which was publicised as New Zealand’s only native Forest Zipline Canopy Tours. I was a little uncertain. Marilyn is not what you might call athletic and I suffer from quite bad vertigo but I did not feel I could let her go on her own, as I would have worried what she was getting up to the whole time she was away, so off we both went. Forget what you have seen with these baby ziplines in the parks in this country. This was New Zealand where it appears no outdoor pursuit is worth doing unless there is a real chance of losing some part of your anatomy. There were 6 ziplines, the longest of which was 220 metres and 25 metres above the ground and 3 or 4 rope bridges and miscellaneous linking sections, all of which shook, vigorously. After overcoming a very wobbly rope bridge several of us stood on the first take-off point wondering what on earth we were doing there. Then came the moment of truth. You run down this slightly sloped platform and hurl yourself into thin air suspended only by a metal tether, a safety harness and a long swaying metal wire, clinging to the suspension harness. It was about half way down before I opened my eyes. Of course by the third or fourth zip line you become quite blasé about all this. You now trust the suspension point and start to have fun as you do the star shapes and other gymnastic tricks on the end of the harness. “Look no hands!!”

There is something of this going on with the two stories from the bible we read earlier.

In the gospel story we have Jesus asking the disciples to take him across the other side of the lake. At the beginning of Chapter 4 we see him actually in the boat teaching the crowd because there were so many of them. By evening he was probably tired and needed to escape for some peace, which probably explains why there was a cushion in what would normally have been a working boat. Off they go and all seems calm. Weather around this lake however is notoriously unreliable. Even today there are notices in some of the lake side car parks warning drivers to be careful as big waves can swamp cars parked on seemingly safe beaches. In a very short period of time the wind gets up, the waves are lashed into a frenzy and the disciples think they are going to drown. In those days, apart from some fishermen, the Jews were not a seafaring people, and tended to be more fearful of the water than many other societies. If you look back into Jewish scripture the sea to them represents disorder and chaos, risk and danger. It is the place that symbolises the dark powers of evil.

Furthermore to be taken by the sea was often seen as a punishment for disobedience:

- What happened to Jonah when sailing away in the wrong direction – a great storm came up and he ended up in the fish until he was ready to do what God wanted him to do.
- In the story of creation God’s order emerged from the dark primal sea.

- Several of the psalms speak of the creator God who rules the raging of the seas, telling the rough and threatening waves to quieten down. Psalm 89 verse 9 – You rule over the surging seas: when the waves mount up you still them.

The disciples were perplexed. They had joined Jesus in the boat voluntarily. They had done nothing wrong so why were they being punished. Also they could not understand how Jesus could sleep.

The forces of evil were roused and he just lay there on a pillow seemingly oblivious to everything going on around him. In fact the disciples had to wake him before he stirred himself into action. It was at that point he revealed himself as more than just a great teacher and healer as he spoke to the seas and the storm died down. The disciples had some faith, otherwise they would not have been there but at that point it was not enough. Later on, with a little more practice they performed many miracles themselves but, as far as I am aware there is no evidence any of them ever calmed a storm. Paul survived several shipwrecks but he never prevented them. That seemingly was the prerogative of God himself. Who was this Jesus they must have thought.

Then we have David. The youngest of the brothers and the one who spent much of the time alone on the hillside with the sheep. Arriving at Saul's camp must have been some shock. The vast numbers, the noise but what would have struck him most would have been the feeling of helplessness. Goliath was a frighteningly big bloke and none of them wanted to tangle with him. In fact when he appeared in front of the battle lines and started hurling his insults they all ran. We see then the certainty and confidence of youth. "God has helped me in the past" David told King Saul. With God's help I have chased after and killed lions and bears who stole lambs from the flock. God would not want this arrogant Philistine to mock his people, his armies in this way. I will fight him. Bearing in mind what was at stake God must have influenced Saul in some way to accede to this seemingly suicidal offer as the chances were this could only end badly, both for David and Israel. Then we see the classic encounter of lightly armed, fast and mobile guerrilla against a static and well armed enemy. We all know the result. David won. Or was it God who won!!

Now it is unlikely that any of us will need to be a David but all of these stories teach us something about trusting in or relying on Jesus.

### **Chose to be there**

First of all we see that all of the participants in the story had some level of faith because they all chose to be where they were. No one, as far as I can see was forcing them to do anything they did not want to do.

- I was up that zipline to show solidarity with my wife, trusting that the New Zealand Authorities were not too keen on tourists being mutilated.
- David had been sent by his father to bring provisions to his brothers. No one was expecting him, at his age, to take on Goliath. He decided that, based on what he already knew of God

- The disciples were in that boat because some time earlier, when Jesus had come to them and said “Follow me” they had responded because they trusted what they knew of him: One of the consequences of that decision being that they were now in the middle of Lake Galilee in a frighteningly rough storm. Fortunately as we know from many passages in the bible God honours that decision and makes promises of his own.

- Matthew 28 20 Surely I am with you always even to the end of the age.

- 2 Corinthians 12 v 9 words to Paul –My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.

- Hebrews 13 v 5 echoing Deuteronomy – Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you

Nevertheless as Christians we are required to continually make decisions. Decisions that affect us or which may affect or influence other people. Some may not require much faith as they are quite simple and do not seem to present any significant risk or long lasting consequences. Some may require much more faith as the outcome could have major implications for later on. Sometimes we will be presented with choices and in hindsight we will know we have made a wrong decision. We have not taken an opportunity to share the gospel, or help someone who needed it, or we have spent our money on the wrong things or such like and we feel guilty. That is probably why so many of our prayers of confession mention not only the things we have done wrong, but also the things we have failed to do which we know we ought to do. Fortunately God is a gracious God and has this wonderful knack of helping us to make the best of the bad situations we create for ourselves or which we find ourselves in through no fault of our own so long as we continue to have faith in him. So we are continually required to make choices which require us to exercise faith.

### **Challenges get harder**

The second thing I notice is that the challenges or choices we are faced with probably ought to get harder as our Christian life progresses. My wife and I are members of the Caravanners and Campers Christian Fellowship and this organisation runs occasional rallies, most of which involve some sort of worship, teaching or fellowship sessions. I remember being at one last year and there was an open time of sharing and some of the things that had happened to folk were quite amazing. There was one guy who had been asked by some of the employees to see one of his co-workers on the night shift who was convinced he was seeing menacing figures perched on the top of his lathe and was in quite a troubled state. The upshot was he ended up performing an impromptu exorcism, not something he had ever been involved in before, and which he confessed scared the living daylights out of him. But it seemed to work. Another spoke of a miraculous healing from cancer. Another spoke of some of the unusual things that had happened to him while working for a Christian charity in Eastern Europe. Now these things were good to hear. They encouraged us that God is still active and in charge but I do not know about you. There is a risk they can make you start to feel inadequate because your

Christian experience fails to reach such heights. We feel a bit like the disciples must have felt when Jesus asked them “Have you still no faith?” The answer is of course that these amazing experiences do not come out of the blue. They happen because the individuals involved have learnt to trust over the years in simpler situations and now are entrusted with greater responsibility. One of the problems, I think, is that we no longer actually look for or expect God’s hand at work in our everyday lives so we fail to see even a shadow of the power he has. What is it the old hymn says “Count your blessings, name them one by one and it will surprise you what the Lord has done”. All of us are given natural abilities and quite naturally we are more confident when taking on tasks which draw on those abilities or skills. However the risk in that approach is that we rely on our own abilities and do not allow God to work through us. We stay doing the things we are comfortable with, things we perhaps have done for years and our Christian life does not develop as it ought. It may even go backwards. Every now and then we need the courage to respond to those challenges which take us outside our comfort zone, which challenge the priorities in our lives and our expectations of God for only then can we start to rely on God and not ourselves. For that to happen we need trust. As we know from human relationships trust is not something that just happens. It needs to be worked at. Our trust in other people deepens as we know more about them, as we know that in difficult situations we can rely on their support or help, whatever it is we need to help us through. It is no different with God.

### **Why problems**

However, and this is the sting in the tale, as we all know there may still be problems. We are human beings subject to all the uncertainties and vagaries of life that face all humans. Being Christians does not make us exempt. David overcame Goliath: I survived the Ziplines: The disciples were not drowned. But that may not be the case.

Stephen was stoned to death for speaking out for his faith. The apostle Paul endured all kinds of hardships. Countless Christians have been martyred and ill treated over the centuries. In parts of the world today to be a Christian invites persecution, discrimination, ill-treatment even death. And yet inexplicably it is often in such areas that the church is growing.

When we are facing difficulties that seem to have no resolution some well meaning people will tell us all we need is to have more faith, more trust, using passages like the storm as their theological basis. Maybe we do – but can that be the only answer because Paul and Stephen and all those others I mentioned had faith and trust in abundance. It was for people like these struggling against the terrors of the Roman Empire that the Book of Revelation was penned. If there was going to be no trouble there was no need for Revelation. When everything was going wrong they needed that glorious picture of Christ on the throne. At the end of the day we cannot understand fully the purposes of God. What is it Isaiah writes 55 v 8 & 9

*As the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

God will do it his way. We just need faith to believe his way is best for us and sometimes that is not easy.

Just a word of encouragement if you think God needs our faith to work and cannot or will not bless people who are not living great “lives of faith”. Solomon was given wisdom when he had just signed a treaty with the Egyptians and had married foreign princesses. All forbidden in the law. However much of a mess we make of it there is always hope.