

ALL SAINTS WESTON

Talk by Tom Peryer

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JESUS STILL THE STORM

LUKE 8: 22 - 25

Today's story is one of the most familiar stories of the whole Bible. It is one that most of us probably heard for the first time as children and we have heard many a sermon or talk on it since those childhood days. You may already feel you know what's coming and maybe you are right but maybe there is some fresh nugget to seize hold of or an old familiar truth which can speak afresh to you and your situation this morning – in whatever storm you find yourself in.

But you see there I am straightaway into looking at the symbolism of the story when what we need to do is firstly to understand what is actually going on in the story ...what happened? ... what do we know about the facts of the matter and the context?

So this morning I want us to go on a journey of discovery through the various layers of this story. Come with me now on a mini-voyage through this passage. We'll pause to try to get something of the first level of understanding and then move to the way in which we re-interpret a story about a group of people in a literal boat on a literal lake to a group of people sat in a church 2,000 years later.

Actually apart from me, you are all sat in a boat. That's because you are in the part of the church known as the nave, which as I am sure most of you know comes from the Latin word 'navis' meaning 'ship' from which we get our words 'navy' and 'nautical'.

Firstly let's note that Jesus was tired. And perhaps not just tired but exhausted. And that is probably true for his disciples too.

Jesus has been responding to the needs of many, many people – and that is tiring: Matthew and Mark both refer to the crowds that kept surrounding and following Jesus. People who wanted his attention all the time. Matthew has Jesus healing a leper, followed by the healing of the centurion's servant (which Pippa spoke eloquently about last week) and then healing Peter's mother-in-law, there in Capernaum which sat on the lakeside at its northern end. Also he has been teaching the crowds and in particular the parable of the sower.

Matthew writes '*when evening came many were brought to him*'. Ministering to people is exhausting: whether you are a parent, a carer for someone with a debilitating or terminal illness, whether you are a nurse or a teacher or a vicar. Physical work is tiring; mental work is tiring; but giving of yourself to people day in and day out is perhaps even more draining. You remember what Jesus said when the woman touched in the crowd: '*something has gone out of me.*'

Do you know this is the only place in the gospels that we read of Jesus sleeping? We sometimes read that he spent all night in prayer or went to a solitary place but never – apart from here – that he went to sleep. And he must have been very tired for he falls asleep pretty quickly and it can't have been very comfortable, even if, as Mark writes, he was sleeping on a cushion

The humanity of Jesus: But what we can draw from this simple observation about Jesus being tired, is that it points to his humanity and human nature. As far as we know, the angels do not need sleep and we are told that God our Father neither slumbers nor sleep but a feature of all human beings is that we get tired and need sleep.

The apostles and the church fathers who came after them had to do lots of theological wrestling with all sorts of questions and issues. One of the key ones was how best to describe the nature of Jesus. In what sense was he divine? Was he divine at all? In what sense was he human, like us? Was he in fact human? And indeed the divinity and humanity of Jesus is still something that is hard for us to grasp. But the gospel writers make it clear that Jesus was not some ghostly apparition or angelic being but a man of flesh and blood who grew tired, needed to sleep, was thirsty and hungry, who bled, who wept, who got angry, who was tempted. So the very fact that all three gospel writers have mentioned his physical tiredness and need of sleep is in fact a little piece of evidence of his genuine human nature.

But we shall also see that the story also illustrates his divine nature too, so much so that these close friends of his all ask the same question in each of the three gospels' "Who is this? Just what sort of a man, what sort of a person is this?"

Notice whose initiative it is to make the journey across the lake. It is Jesus. Matthew says *'When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake'* Gave orders! Luke and Mark have Jesus say "let us cross to the other side" which is rather gentler. But the initiative to set sail is Jesus. It is not a whim of the disciples thinking their own thoughts and doing things their way. This is important to understand because when they get into trouble, there is no need to blame themselves. BY contrast, you know that one of the other great storms in the bible is the one where Paul was caught up in the Mediterranean. That storm lasted for many days. On that occasion Paul had warned the captain of the ship not to set sail, that it was a foolish venture. And so Paul was not surprised when they were hit by this storm and at one point, he tells the whole ship's company *'I told you so – but you wouldn't listen, would you?'*

But on the occasion with Jesus it was their very following of Jesus, their obedience to him, that landed them in trouble! And although we see their shortcomings later on in the story, we must also recognise that at this point, whatever misgivings any of them may have had about setting sail, they followed Jesus in to the boat. *'Where he goes, I will follow'* they said.

You know it is often the case that following Jesus leads to trouble of one sort or another. This is obviously very true when it leads directly to persecution but trouble need not just be persecution.

Spurgeon preaching on this incident says:

The storm was the more trying because it came upon them when they were in the path of duty. Their Master had bidden them cross the sea; they were not upon a holiday trip. They had not even followed the suggestion of a brother who had said, "I go a-fishing," but they were steering under their great Captain's orders. They were doing right, and suffering trouble in consequence. This has often perplexed good men.

Too right! Have you ever felt you have tried to do the right thing, followed what you thought was the Lord's guidance and then found yourself saying to God, to quote Oliver Hardy as in Laurel and Hardy *'here's another nice mess you gotten me into'*

The wonderful Matthew Henry says: *'One would have expected, that having Christ with them, they should have had a very favourable gale, but it is quite otherwise; for Christ would show that they who are passing with him over the ocean of this world to the other side, must expect storms by the way. '*

I hope you will bear with me if make a parallel with the situation we find ourselves in with the ROCK Project, We have something of a

squall now in terms of the costs of the project and the money that we can see in our church bank account.

Now let's think for a moment about these disciples in the boat with Jesus. I None of the gospel writers says exactly how many were there but if we assume it was the twelve, what do we know about them? Well, we know that there were at least four fishermen in the boat: Peter and his brother Andrew; and John and his brother James – the sons of Zebedee. Surely, as seasoned fishermen they would have been very familiar with storms on the lake. Well actually no. Apparently storms on Lake Galilee are comparatively rare maybe every 30 years or so. This is probably due to its very low and sheltered location. It is the lowest fresh-water lake in the world being around 700 feet below proper sea-level. But very occasionally the winds do suddenly sweep down on the lake whipping up the waves. So for the seasoned fishermen, it would still have been a frightening occurrence. But what about those non-fishermen amongst the disciples? – Matthew, the tax collector, John the quiet, beloved disciple, Phillip, Bartholomew. Landlubbers all of them. No wonder they were scared witless when the storm came up.

We have often spoken of the motley crew that Jesus gathered around himself. Well, here we see again another instance of a group of people mostly not fitted for what was about to come upon them. It is very likely that none of them could swim and certain that quite a few of them did not know the first thing about sailing, let alone sailing a boat in storm conditions.

It is not difficult to see the symbolic parallels with ourselves is it? Nothing to do with sailing ships but in other ways. Do you feel ill-equipped to serve God; not talented enough; not experienced enough? Not prayerful enough? Not dedicated enough? Not holy enough? Not familiar enough with scripture; not eloquent enough? Well all those 'not enoughts' make you enough for God's team. Jesus disciples were not just ill-equipped for a storm they were a motley,

ill-equipped crew for many of the things they had to face. But as someone once said '*God does not choose the qualified; he equips and qualifies the chosen.*' Most if not all of those who were called to serve God in the Bible are all too aware of their lack of natural gifts or their weakness or fears.

Now for the storm itself. It's described as a '*furious squall*'- the waves are coming over the boat the boat is in danger of being swamped –. I have never literally been in that predicament. I don't know if the sailors amongst you have John Barnet? Paddy Gleave? So most of us don't have literal parallels of facing a storm.

However I dare say most of you, if not all of you, have felt from time to time in your life that your boat, your life, your situation was hit by a storm of events and circumstances so that you felt overwhelmed or to use the phrase here 'swamped'. You may have felt that you were in danger of sinking altogether, of losing much or all that was precious to you, of running aground, of drowning. You know what it is to be buffeted by the waves of life, mostly through no fault of your own although sometimes you may have felt you brought the storm on you – as Jonah felt.

The storms of life are something that everyone faces and nowhere are we told that being a Christian inoculates you against those storms or prevents them happening. No what we are told is that whatever the storm, however strong the winds, however tall the waves, however much water we are taking on board, Jesus is there with us; that God is faithful; that he will never leave us or forsake us – even if it does appear that he is asleep at times! Someone has said that '*to have God in your life does not means sailing seas that never have storms but sailing on a boat that can never sink.*'

The reactions of the disciples: In all three gospel accounts, the disciples go and wake Jesus up with their shouts of fear. I wonder, however, what shouted conversations between the disciples took

place before they awakened Jesus with their shouts and their shaking of him.

Let's assume there are twelve of them. I would guess that they were not all of the same mind. Maybe not all are terrified out of their minds. Perhaps some still trust that with Jesus in the boat all will be well. Some believe that they can see out the storm and that land is not very far away. After all from side to side of the lake is only seven miles.

Of course in any group of followers of Jesus, in any church and in any church council there are a variety of faiths, of temperaments, of spiritual experience. There is usually no single point of view or spiritual assessment of the situation.

In this storm-tossed boat, I wonder who, if any, were calm, who was scared, who was it that shook Jesus to wake him up and shouted at him *"Lord wake us! Lord save us! Lord don't you care what is happening to us right now? Don't you care that we are all going to drown?"*

Have you ever prayed a prayer like that? King David prayed plenty of them like that. You can read them in psalm after psalm, And Christians down through the ages have prayed prayers of desperation, prayers out of fear, prayers in the face of death; prayers in the face of crises, things seemingly going badly wrong, disasters and a myriad of other things. Lord, save me and I will ... Lord don't you care what happens to me and my family? Lord why are you silent? Why are you sleeping?

I am spending quite a bit of time at the moment reading all about John Newton. He was in many a storm and one of them radically altered the direction of his life altogether. (see the end of this talk for his account) But much later he became a settled mature Christian and a Church of England minister in Buckinghamshire. In

1765 and in a day before clergy pensions he heard that all his savings had been lost in a firm that went bankrupt. You could say that was a bit of a storm for him and his wife Polly. A heavy blow. This is what he wrote in his diary:

'Had advice today that my friend Joseph Mannesty's business at Liverpool is quite lost. All my savings were in that business. It was not much but it was my all. I repine not at this. The Lord has made him an instrument oof much good to me in times past; and though creatures fail, the Lord will not want any means to give me what he sees necessary.

That was trust. That was the eye of faith. Newton was no fair-weather Christian. And indeed the Lord did supply his needs in a very wonderful and unexpected way shortly afterwards.

It is all too easy to be a confident Christian when the sun is shining and the winds are calm; it's a different matter when the dark night is upon us and the winds are howling all around us. Then we forget that, as the song has it:

*And the God of the good times, is still God in the bad times
The God of the day, is still God in the night.*

Jesus steps in revealing his divinity: So this is the point when Jesus steps in – perhaps to his disappointment that he has to do this but maybe in the economy and planning of God, so that something else would be revealed for generations of Christians to come. If the tiredness of Jesus reveals his humanity, now his rebuke to the winds and the waves reveals his divinity. When he is woken by the disciples in their fear, he stands fearless and rebukes the winds just as he rebuked the fever in Peter's mother-in-law and the demons that challenged him and the devil that confronted him in the wilderness.

The opening letter of John's gospel tells us that through Jesus the world came into being. There was not anything created that was created. Paul in Colossians tells us that all things hold together in him. So in his divine authority empowered by the Spirit he is able to order the winds and waves to cease their raging.

This display of authority also highlights the central mission of Jesus to bring peace and reconciliation. Here he brings peace to nature and all becomes still and peaceful. This is his mission. This is his promise to those who follow him. This is the ultimate destiny of the world. Paul says God was in Christ reconciling the world – bringing peace – to himself. Isaiah prophecies that Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Jesus himself breathes peace upon his disciples. He is the God of peace. His mission is ultimately to bring peace to a world that still groans with earthquakes and climate disaster; to a world divided by wars; to troubled individuals.

A new kind fear for the disciples: This display of authority and control leaves the disciples with a different kind of fear to the one they had been experiencing. In the storm they had been petrified of dying. Now they are over-awed and possessed of a godly fear as they see this display of divinity. *'In fear and amazement' writes Luke. So much so that they ask themselves a question that has been asked down the centuries. 'Who is this? What kind of man is this?' The answer is He is unique. He is God and Man united in one person. Touched with the limitations of humanity and yet empowered by the authority of divinity.*

A question for us: Let's end with the question that Jesus put to those scared witless disciples. *"Why are you so afraid. Why do you have so little faith?"*

Is he saying that to me today to you today to our church today. Where is our faith and security? How deep is our faith? Are we a fearful people or a faithful people? Intimidated by the circumstances in our lives and

our world or trusting in the goodness and faithfulness of God for us and for his church?

Now as we reflect on that question, let's listen to this song and join in with the final verse. The words are written by a man who knew about tragedy. He lost his children in a terrible ship disaster on the Atlantic. Not long afterwards he penned these words about learning to be still in the good times and the bad.

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know[b]
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Refrain
It is well, (it is well),
With my soul, (with my soul)
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life,
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

But Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait,
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh, trump of the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord!
Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul.

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
A song in the night, oh my soul!

JOHN NEWTON'S ACCOUNT OF THE STORM THAT SET HIM ON THE PATH BACK TO GOD

9 March 1748

I went to bed that night in my usual security and indifference, but was awaked from a sound sleep by the force of a violent sea, which broke on board us. So much of it came down below, as filled the cabin I lay in with water. This alarm was followed by a cry from the deck, that the ship was going down, or sinking. As soon as I could recover myself, I essayed to go upon deck, but was met upon the ladder by the Captain, who desired me to bring a knife with me. While I returned for the knife, another person went up in my room [place], who was instantly washed overboard. We had no leisure to lament him, nor did we expect to survive him long for we soon found the ship was filling with water very fast. The-sea had torn away the upper timbers, on one side, and made a mere wreck in a few minutes.

Taken in all circumstances, it was astonishing, and almost miraculous, that any of us survived to relate the story. We had immediate recourse to the pumps, but the water increased against our efforts: some of us were set to bailing in another part of the vessel, that is, to lade it out with buckets and pails. We had but eleven or twelve people to sustain this service; and notwithstanding all we could do, she was full, or very near it; and then, with an ordinary cargo, she must have sunk of course,

but we had a great quantity of bees-wax and camwood on board, which were lighter than the water; and as it pleased God, that we received this shock in the very crisis of the gale, towards morning we were enabled to employ some means for our safety, which succeeded beyond hope.

I
n about an hour's time, the day began to break, and the wind abated. We expended most of our clothes and bedding to stop the leaks, (though the weather was exceeding cold, especially to us, who had so lately left a hot climate), over these we nailed pieces of boards, and at last perceived the water abate. At the beginning of this hurry, I was little affected; I pumped hard, and endeavoured to animate myself and my companions. I told one of them, that in a few days this distress would serve us to talk of over a glass of wine: but he, being a less hardened sinner than myself, replied with tears, "No, it is too late now."

About nine o'clock, being almost spent with cold and labour, I went to speak with the Captain, who -was busied elsewhere, and just as I was returning from him, I said, almost without any meaning, "*If this will not do, the Lord have mercy upon us.*" This, (though spoken with little reflection) was the first desire I had breathed for mercy for the space of many years. I was instantly struck with my words and so it directly - occurred, "What mercy can there be for me?"

I was obliged to return to the pump, and there I continued till noon, almost every passing wave breaking over my head but we made ourselves fast with ropes, that we might not be washed away. Indeed, I expected, that every time the vessel descended in the sea, she would rise no more and though I dreaded death now, and my heart foreboded the worst, if the scriptures, which I had long since opposed, were indeed true; yet still I was but half-convinced, and remained for a space of time in a sullen frame, a mixture of despair and impatience. I thought, if the Christian religion was true, I could not be forgiven ; and

was therefore expecting, and almost, at times, wishing to know the worst of it.

11) March 1748: The 21st of March, is a day much to be remembered by me, and I have never suffered it to pass wholly unnoticed since the year 1748. On that day the Lord sent from on high and delivered me out of deep waters.—I continued at the pump from three in the morning till near noon, and then I could do no more. I went and lay down upon my bed, uncertain, and almost indifferent, whether I should rise again. In an hour's time I was called, and not being able to pump, I went to the helm, and steered the ship till midnight, excepting a small interval for refreshment.

I had here leisure and I convenient opportunity for reflection: I began to think of my former religious professions, the extraordinary turns in my life; the calls, warnings, and deliverances, I had met with, the licentious course of my conversation, particularly my unparalleled effrontery in making the gospel history the constant subject of profane ridicule. I thought there never was, nor could be, such a sinner as myself, and then I concluded, at first, that my sins were too great to be forgiven.

But when I saw, beyond all probability, there was still hope of respite, and heard, about six in the evening, that the ship was freed from water—there arose a gleam of hope. I thought I saw the hand of God displayed in our favour; I began to pray—I could not utter the prayer of faith; I could not draw near to a reconciled God ; and call him Father... I now began to think of that Jesus, whom I had so often derided; I recollected the particulars of his life, and of his death ; a death for sins not his own, but, as I remembered, for the sake of those, who, in their distress, should put their trust in him.