

Sermon 23 June 2024 Jesus calms the storm

1 Peter 5:6-11 Mark 4:35-41

The story of Jesus calming the storm has been used countless times as an illustration of what Jesus can do in our lives. Taken on its own in a literal sense it is a marvellous story of the power and glory of God but it is far more important and of much greater value if we look at the symbolism of the story.

But first let's set the scene. The Sea of Galilee was, and still is, notorious for its storms. On the west side, there are hills with valleys and gullies, and when a cold wind comes in from the west these gullies act like gigantic funnels. The wind becomes compressed in them and rushes down upon the lake with a sudden violence so that the lake can be calm one moment and a raging storm the next.

Jesus had been preaching to the crowds that day. He was tired and so was having a well-earned nap in the stern of the boat. Then suddenly out of nowhere the storm struck. The disciples were a tad frightened. They woke Jesus and he calmed the storm, much to the astonishment of the disciples.

According to an ancient myth, which was shared at one time by the Jews, the original act of creation involved God in a desperate, but finally victorious contest with the forces of chaos and evil which were located in the waters of the sea. As a consequence, the image of a storm was frequently used as a metaphor for the evil forces of the world, and the ability to control the sea and subdue storms was regarded as one of the characteristic signs of divine power. I quote from Psalm 89:8-9: *'Lord God Almighty, none is as mighty as you; in all things you are faithful, O Lord. You rule over the powerful sea, you calm its angry waves.'*

So, this is a story of the divinity of Jesus. It is also a story of the power of Jesus. Michael Green, well-known Christian author, wrote, *'But it was not only the power of his teaching which struck people so forcefully, it was the authority of his deeds. Who was this who could address a storm as if it was a living thing, and bid it cease its raging?'*

In his miracles, and it doesn't really matter how you perceive or interpret his miracles, they were in any sense amazing deeds, Jesus demonstrates the power of God. In this case, his power over the elements in a literal sense, his power over the forces of evil in a symbolic sense.

But the story is more than that again. The crux of the story is not that Jesus stopped a storm in Galilee; the crux of the story is that wherever Jesus is, the storms of life become a calm. And our lives are full of storms, of conflicts, of worries and challenges. We wrestle with storms created by personal problems, whether they be of relationships, grief, or doubts about ourselves. We wrestle with anxiety, whether that be work related, relationship related, or just stuff going on in our lives. None of us are immune.

The message for us is that in Jesus we can find peace and comfort; in Jesus we find the ability to meet the challenges of life. It begins with God. *'When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you.'* Isaiah 43:2. From our first reading: *'Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about what happens to you.'* 1 Peter 5:7. It continues with Jesus: *'Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'* Matthew 11:28.

Shortly, we will be singing, 'What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! Blessed Saviour thou hast promised, thou wilt all our burdens bear.'

This man is Divine, powerful and a comfort giver. You might believe in him, you might not, but you certainly cannot ignore him. The impact of his 33 years on earth has had on humanity is undeniable.

For twenty centuries, art, culture, philosophy, architecture and religious belief have been shaped and influenced by this man. The date of his birth divides the history of the world into its two eras. The book recording his life and work has been printed in more languages than any other book – 2,060 to be precise – with more copies sold than any other book.

Of all people who have ever existed, Jesus stands as one of the great intellects of all time. His teaching has been studied, judged, analysed and interpreted by philosophers and thinkers down the ages. When a large group of business people in Britain were asked at a sales seminar whom they considered was the greatest leader of all time, almost everyone replied, “Jesus Christ.’ No other leader has so great a following, so long after his death.

And all this from a man whose ministry spanned a mere three and a half years and who never wrote a book. The other extraordinary aspect of his teaching is that it is so very simple and straightforward. The language he used was down to earth, the principles he espoused are easy to grasp. His messages are related to our everyday lives.

How can we ignore such a man? How can we not be affected by the influence and impact that this one man has had on civilisation? In John 10:38 he said, *‘Even though you do not believe me, you should at least believe my deeds, in order that you may know once and for all that the Father is in me and that I am in the Father.’* Man, are those words so relevant to us today! Are those words so relevant in today’s society which appears to be becoming more and more secular! I can’t help feeling that two thousand years later those words are even more relevant than when Jesus uttered them so long ago.

However, the onus is on us. It is up to us to open our hearts to God, to seek that relationship with Christ. We do that by talking to him, and that’s not just a one-off conversation. As I said two weeks ago, it is a case of perseverance. Pray, pray, pray. Persevere and you will establish that relationship. I give you the four p’s – Pray, Persist, Persevere, Prevail. Do that and that relationship will become the cornerstone of your life.

Let me finish with the words attributed to Phillips Brooks, American Episcopal minister who lived in the 19th century: *‘Nineteen centuries have come and gone since Jesus lived. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat. all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on earth as has that one solitary life.’*