

‘The disciples were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”’

The sea of Galilee is beautiful but unpredictable; it can turn from flat calm to raging storm in a matter of minutes. In our gospel story the disciples, although experienced fishermen, are caught, and the storm brings out their worst fears. Especially as the landlubber Jesus is asleep in the stern.

Ancient people, including the Jews, were terrified of water. They believed the sea to be inhabited by evil powers and monsters, such as the great Leviathan. (And in case we are tempted to mock, there are still people today hunting this monster in Loch Ness.) The sea represents chaos and only God can tame it. As our first reading from Psalm 107 has it:

Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of the LORD,
his wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end.
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.

In Psalm 44, the psalmist appeals to God to intervene when everything seems to be going badly and asks whether God is asleep.

And so the disciples call on the sleeping Jesus as their ancestors called on God, and he stills the storm. Their question, ‘Who then is this?’ is rhetorical. If only God can control the wind and the waves then this must be God.

The early church identified very closely with this story and its imagery is all around us. You are sitting under a vaulted wooden roof which looks like the hull of a boat,

and that is intentional. The place you are sitting is called the nave because 'navis' is Latin for ship. And the place where I am standing is called the pulpit after the Latin 'pulpitum' or platform. Fishing boats had a raised platform at the stern, from which Jesus preached to the crowds who thronged to see him by the Sea of Galilee, and where he slept in this story.

We are all – literally – in the same boat, tossed about by the storms of life: illness, loss of work, broken relationships. Life is not plain sailing. So we turn to God and yell at him to wake up and stop us drowning. And Jesus, who is with us in our little boat even though we may not notice his presence, points us to the ultimate sign of his care, the cross. Engulfed by the waters of his own death, Jesus Christ takes on himself every storm that can ever happen and assures us of our safety. There is no storm that can separate us from his love.

These days our adventures on water are more likely to be in a cross channel ferry or a comfortable cruise ship (well, one day) than a small sailing boat. In such a vessel we are passengers, taking no active part in the management of the ship, with no need to mix with others except when we buy refreshments. We may expect to be entertained and we certainly don't wish to take any risks. Maybe some people who come to church have a similar set of expectations: to let others make the running, to mix only with those they wish to, to be entertained with good music and comforting sermons, to feel massaged rather than challenged.

Well I'm sorry but that is not what a Christian church is for. We come here because we know that life is difficult and challenging. We seek a community in which we can work together and to which we can welcome anyone who chooses to join us. Above all we seek a guide who can navigate us through the storms of life and in whom we can put our trust. That guide is Jesus. He is with us in our boat, our 'navis', our church, today. We listen to his teaching in the Bible, we pray to him in thanksgiving, confessing our wrongdoings and asking for his help. And we share in his broken body and outpoured blood in the communion we will celebrate shortly.

Do we leave him sleeping, or turn to him only when desperate? Or do we give our lives and the life of our church to him, knowing that he will give us in return everything we could possibly desire?