

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

They roused Jesus, saying: "Teacher, is it nothing to you that we are going down?" Awake now, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea: "Quiet! Settle down!" ...Jesus reprimanded the disciples: "Why are you such cowards? Don't you have any faith at all?"

Mark 4, 35-41

The more I reflect on the Gospels, the more I come to appreciate the skill and artistry of the writers. For instance, there is a recurring pattern in Mark's Gospel of a parable being closely followed by a miracle. Last Sunday's gospel-reading gave us two short parables about seeds and their sowing. Following on immediately is the story of Jesus miraculously calming the fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee (today's gospel-reading). Moreover, Mark very skilfully parallels and contrasts these two events.



Chapter 4 of his Gospel has three parables associated with seed-sowing. It opens with the well-known one of the seed falling on all different kinds of ground - stony ground where it comes to nothing, ground where it is choked by thorns, ground that varies in quality and yields meagre, medium and high quality crops. The chapter concludes with the two parables of last Sunday's gospel-reading. The parable of the seed that is sown and left to the forces of nature can be described as a parable about absence and the trust that is often implied by absence. For instance, parents sometimes go out for an evening of relaxation and trust that, while they are away, their teenage children will act responsibly. In this particular parable, we are told of the farmer who sows the seed and leaves it, going to bed every night and getting up every morning, trusting that the forces of nature will do their work. He does not intervene until the crop has ripened and is ready for harvesting. In today's story of the calming of the storm, Jesus models the message he proclaimed in the parable. He sows the seed of faith and trust in his disciples, and then, on that very day, takes a boat with them, and, like the farmer in the parable, goes to sleep, curled up in the back of the boat. His sleeping, just like the farmer's, is a sign of trust. - trust in God and trust in his disciples. When the storm breaks, the disciples are soon beside themselves, in the grip of panic and fear. This is understandable, and something that we can verify from our own experience. The storm, of course, is a metaphor for the trauma we have all experienced in the physical, emotional, relational and spiritual aspects of our own lives. What's more, we have all experienced sleepless nights worrying about something we have to face the following day. We are well aware that there is nothing that can be done there and then in the middle of the night, but that doesn't take away our anxiety and fretting. We just can't bring ourselves to behave like the farmer who goes to sleep night after night, patiently waiting for the seed to grow and mature. We feel the urge to solve immediately what is worrying us, or, even more, we expect God to solve it for us.

Meanwhile, the disciples, with a number of experienced fishermen among them, struggle to keep their boat on an even keel. Yet their teacher and leader is, seemingly, oblivious to their plight. He remains sound asleep. That looks like absence with a capital A. Eventually, the disciples rouse Jesus and shake him until he is fully present. He takes in the situation, rises to his full height and with a powerful voice commands the wind and the waves to settle down. Then he turns and reprimands them: "Why are you so cowardly? Don't you have any faith at all?" And the narrator tells us that, though they were terribly afraid of the storm, they are now even more afraid because of what they have just seen - Jesus doing something only God can do!

Keeping last Sunday's two parables in mind, we can make some connections. The mustard seed, the most insignificant and pestiferous of seeds grows into a bush large enough to give shelter to the birds, the least of all God's creatures. So, this parable suddenly turns into a parable about reversal. It turns human expectations upside down, making the point that what Jesus refers to as the reign of God is a brand-new ordering of things, a world in which those who were last will be placed first and those who were small will be elevated to greatness. And the story of the storm follows the same pattern of reversal. As chapter 4 of Mark's Gospel begins, we are told that the crowd was so large that Jesus had to get into a boat to make himself heard. (The physics of this is that the crowd became something like an amphitheatre, with Jesus locating himself at the central point of the arc, the best place for making himself heard.) Now, on the very same day, the voice of Jesus is powerful enough to silence the roar of the wind and calm the raging sea. It is surely not by coincidence that, in describing this event both Matthew and Mark use the same Greek word as they attributed to Jesus when he cast out an evil spirit from a man in Capernaum: "Peace! Be still and come out of him!" And it's no wonder that fear, once again, grips the disciples - the Jesus whom they know as a carpenter, become itinerant preacher, has just demonstrated a supernatural command over the forces of nature.

But there is still a whole lot more that we can take from this gospel-reading. Repeatedly, the Gospel writers attribute to Jesus words like "Do not be afraid" and "Fear not" (In the 4 Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles they occur more than 50 times). Fear is really the opposite of faith and trust. Again and again in the New Testament, we are reminded that God is the essence of love. It makes no sense to think that a God who loves us limitlessly and unconditionally would want to frighten us. Allowing fear to hold us in its grip is really turning us away from God and leading us to focus on what we think God cannot do. We lose sight of God's protecting care for us. But that doesn't mean that God is not going to challenge us or invite us to move out of our comfort zones. The very fact that Jesus calls the disciples to join him on the boat and head "for the other side" in the dark suggests that he was challenging them to venture into unknown and difficult territory, where they could not expect to be welcomed with open arms. But aren't we being challenged to venture into strange and hostile territory when following in the footsteps of Jesus means speaking up when we encounter injustice, prejudice, abuse and neglect; when he invites us to bury our resentments? There are even times when we can weather the storms of day-to-day life and still end up being more anxious about the calm that settles when the storm has passed.

The storm of today's gospel-reading is a metaphor for the many storms we encounter in our lives. But let's not miss the opening sentences of that reading: "Late that day he said to them: "'Let's go across to the other side'. They took him in the boat as he was" (my emphasis). Those words prompt me to ask myself: "Am I ready, willing and able to meet Jesus as he is, rather than set about remodelling him as I would like him to be?" We all run the risk of wanting to attribute to God and to Jesus qualities that domesticate them and protect our comfort.

Finally, I dare to suggest that we cannot fully engage with today's readings without acknowledging to ourselves that there have been times of loss, pain, grief or stress when we have felt that God was ignoring us, forgetting us or even punishing us. Hopkins, the great Jesuit poet, was courageous enough to voice what I suggest many of us have felt, when he addressed, in his sonnet *Carrion Comfort*, these impassioned words to God:

But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan
With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

Perhaps there is something in our subconscious that tells us that only proper language is acceptable in our converse with God. But, isn't it true that no relationship we have, even our relationship with God, will ever stand the test of time if we are unable to risk speaking the truth in love?

No character in the Bible had a life tougher than Job. Good, upright, full of kindness and integrity, Job still lost everything he had. His wife and children died; he lost all he had and became a bankrupt; he fell ill, with his entire body covered in boils. He concluded that living an upright life mattered little in the long run, so he gave God an earful, and fell into depression, self-pity and despair. God ignored all that and, in language that echoes some of the imagery of today's gospel-reading, gently brought Job to see God's goodness at work in places that he, in his pain and hurt, had been unable to see: "Then the Lord addressed Job out of the storm and said: "Who is this who obscures divine plans with words of ignorance? (Job 38, 1).

Jesus, revealed to us a God who is forever there for us, a God who does not run from our honesty, a God who walks with us through the storms of our lives, a God who repeatedly says to us: "Do not be afraid, it is I".