

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost Yr A 10 August 2014

Genesis 37.1-4, 12-28 Psalm 105.1-6, 16-22 Romans 10.4-15 Matthew 14.22-36

Life has been stressful lately, hasn't it? The world has been a distressing place these past few weeks, and some events have reached into this community and our own society. Jewish school children threatened on a bus in Sydney's eastern suburbs— things we thought behind us and they are breaking out everywhere with shocking energy and frequency. The terrible events of the past few weeks take their toll on anyone with a shred of compassion. I've been particularly distressed by the news Canon Andrew White, the Anglican Vicar of Baghdad in Iraq has posting about the appalling persecution of the Christian communities there. Whole families murdered - actually martyred - for their faith. For the first time in 1600 years some places had no Christian worship last Sunday.

Distress, anxiety, fear, grief - these are paralyzing feelings. And feeling paralyzed is like sitting in a rocking chair. It feels good for a while. It might even be wise for a time to stop and ponder things. But the movement goes nowhere and neither do we until we wake up to the reality that we are paralysed and nothing is changing.

The gospel portion today draws us into a time when the disciples are in great distress. They are out on the Sea of Galilee at night, a storm has come up as so often happened and still happens there, and they are terrified. Matthew says their boat was 'beaten by the waves' and uses language that literally means 'harassed' and 'tortured'. It's the same language Matthew uses to describe the centurion's servant who lies paralysed at home when the centurion comes and asks Jesus to simply 'say the word' to heal the servant. At the end of a long day, the disciples are in terrible distress, paralysed and panicked, and Jesus is not with them.

Having fed the crowd with nothing but five loaves and two fish, and sent them away satisfied Jesus has gone up the mountain by himself to pray. He tells the disciples to cross the lake; they set out at evening. The winds that suddenly come up are strong and whip up the waves. It's difficult to row and it's really, really unsafe. Their lives are now at risk.

Matthew hints at even more. He uses words that conjure up images of the water as almost alive; even malevolent towards the boat and its sailors. The language evokes primal struggles between

competing forces of good and evil. The Hebrew word for sea is 'yam', close to the Ugaritic word for 'sea monster'. The Hebrews feared the sea. They were not seafarers like the Philistines who lived on the coast. In the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, there is abundant water, but no sea. In the Hebrew scriptures God is said to have brought order out of chaos when the Spirit brooded 'over the face of the waters'. Only God, only the one who has founded the earth upon the seas, only the Creator of the cosmos, can tame the monstrous chaos of the surging sea.

So the disciples are terrified; they are at the mercy of forces way, way beyond human control. And Matthew has conveyed to us that their fear goes deep. It is a primal fear that the world itself, not just the sea, is out of control, intent upon destroying them.

But then, an even more frightening thing happens. In the dead of night, long into their ordeal, around 3 or 4am, Jesus comes walking over the water. Of course the disciples are terrified – Matthews says so plainly, and they screamed their heads off – they thought Jesus was a ghost or a spirit of the lake come to destroy them. They are afraid *of Jesus*; they have yet to recognize him as the one who can become their strength to move from fear to faith.

Think on this for a moment. These disciples feel abandoned by God and yet when God, in Jesus, comes to them they are even more afraid. Perhaps it is only in a situation of such radical distress and such total disorientation to all that we have known before that we are ready to trust God *alone*, even leaving behind confidence in our own strengths and the faith that has brought us thus far, as we embrace a new depth of faith.

Perhaps we are doing this- vicariously - as our guts are wrenched and our hearts broken for our sisters and brothers being killed for their faith in Iraq, now, today, as we gather in peace and go in peace. Just now, they know only the peace they are able, by God's grace, to discern within themselves for there is none in the world around them. And how hard must that be – to trust in God when your children are being killed, when you and the other adults are fleeing to the mountains, when your churches are being torched and Christian homes looted. And the rest of the world is slow to come to your aid. Prayers and money are what Canon White says are needed. Our prayers to sustain them, and our gifts to provide water, food and maybe shelter if it can be purchased.

And then, as Jesus comes walking on water towards the disciples, Peter steps out of the boat at Jesus' command and does the same – for a moment. When Peter's fear returned, he began to sink.

So, what can we make of this strange story? Peter does do what Jesus can do – for a time; partially. But he cannot do it when he looks away from Jesus, nor when his fears are greater than his faith. The disciples knew Jesus well but they did not recognize him when they most needed him. When they did discover who was with them, doing what seemed impossible, they thought they had to *copy* him but could not. Only after Peter had failed and been rescued by Jesus who then got into the boat with them, did the wind die down and there was peace.

If we take this story seriously we must assume that Jesus is coming towards us in the midst of all the distress in our world and in our own lives. God does not ask us to *copy* or try to *be* Jesus; we cannot be him. God does invite us to look to Jesus and to live like him. Not even the fear of dying kept Jesus from his unbroken trust in God. Even when it seemed God had abandoned him, Jesus continued to trust God. And on the other side of his trusting death was new life, transformed life, life as Jesus had never known it – the very life he now shares with us in baptism, in the holy Eucharist, our holy thanksgiving – which when you think about it is another form of holy Advent, another way of holy coming to us.

Just before this story, Jesus has fed a crowd of five thousand with two fish and five loaves. God transformed that small gift, when the people who had them, gave them away. This Sunday's good news – yes it is *good* news – is that our fears can be transformed into faith enough to live through storms and distress. Our fears can be transformed into faith enough to go on even in the face of the potential drowning of the most daring, the most faithful among us.

We can find that Jesus comes to us just when we need him, even though at first his arrival is frightening and confusing. We can find, if we look to him, that his intention is to take us to new places if we will only hear his voice above the distress saying, 'Take heart, it is I, I AM, do not be afraid'.

My prayer for Canon White and his people and the other Christians being persecuted this week is that they hear those words loud and clear, above the storms raging in their streets and churches and witness to that peace, until it is the world's daily reality. As I wrote on the parish Facebook page yesterday, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church and this appalling, costly witness will not eliminate the Church from those lands any more than a storm on the sea of Galilee prevented the faith of the disciples from growing.