Trinity 4B Mark 4: 35-end

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Such a well-known story, the calming of the storm. It is so tempting to say: yeah yeah, we know that one – it’s about trusting in God. But here’s a question: do you think the disciples were more afraid while the storm was raging? Or after Jesus had calmed it?

Where would you be in that situation? Consider: after Jesus stills the seas and wind with his voice, after the disciples recognize that even the elements of nature obey their teacher, and after all that was scaring them half to death has been done away with, the disciples surely experience another kind of fear altogether: the fear – or awe - of suddenly realising they are in the presence of the living God.

They have cast their lots in with this teacher they call Jesus, and now right in front of their eyes, with a single word, he calms a storm in which they truly thought they might die. He has such power and authority that even the wind and the waves obey him.

It has been said that people fear miracles because they fear being changed. And there is absolutely no doubt that Jesus is asking his disciples to change. In this very moment he is taking them from the familiar territory of Capernaum to the strange and foreign land of the Gerasenes. And he is nudging them away from being fishermen to being disciples. And he is preparing them to welcome a kingdom very different from the one they had a) expected and b) wanted.
If the disciples were worried about the storm and its power, now they have a man standing before them who has even greater power and authority. Who is this man?

Of course this question is the central question of Mark’s gospel and the very first verse of Mark tells us the answer to the question: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus is the Son of God.
But the disciples in the boat haven’t yet found this out and so Jesus asks them: Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?
In the story Jesus might be questioning their lack of faith both in the face of the storm and in their lack of ability to understand who he truly is. They lacked faith while the storm was in full spate, but they also lacked faith when confronted with a demonstration of Jesus’ power and authority.
This is a question that will follow the disciples all the way through their journey in Mark’s gospel; as they travel with Jesus and as they witness to all he does and ultimately to who he is. The good news though is that he is with them through it all.

This story of Jesus calming the storm is one of those stories that is not just a great miracle story, but has layers of meaning for us as the church as well as for our personal spiritual journey. Even when we think we know a story really well and understand all that it can teach us, there is usually another level we can go to.
First, it is pertinent to note that the image of the boat, the metaphor as it were, is often used as a symbol of the church and has been an image of the church since earliest times. The idea that we get on board the boat to travel through the seas of life together with Jesus is one which people found quite appealing. Which is why, if you look up at a church roof - inside the building, not outside – you can often see a boat shape. Here in St Peter’s. it’s easier to see in the south aisle than the north, which is much more ornate.

But just as the disciples soon discovered that being in the boat with Jesus does not mean that the waters are always calm so too our spiritual journeys, as individuals and together are not all smooth sailing.
Storms regularly surround us. And it often might feel as though, when the winds and waves of life batter us almost into submission, that Jesus must be having a quick doze in the corner.
But the other side of that coin is the delusion that we sometimes seem to be suffering from that once we jump on the Jesus bandwagon, that all is going to be hunky-dory. That fair weather is what we are owed for signing up. And so we make our faith nice and comfortable, and avoid risk, especially the risk of waking Jesus. Of which, more in a moment…

And then another storm comes crashing in and we are woken from our comfy delusion.

One criticism of the church, particularly the established church, which is bandied around quite frequently, is that it is irrelevant and inconsistent. It may not be news that we want to hear, but I fear it is often said with good reason.

It implies that the storm that rages around us, our first-world Western culture, can toss us wherever it wants because we are meaningless to it. Always willing to compromise our Christian ideals in order not to stand up to the evils in the world.

This is news we may not want to hear but it should wake all of us up from our comfortable sleep. Even more importantly it should us to remember who we have snoring in the back of our boat. But as I said, waking Jesus up can be risky too.

The American Biblical scholar Fred Craddock once stated that being in God’s presence is what everybody wants, and also what nobody wants. The worry is that if we wake Jesus, he is going to ask us about our faith and what we are afraid of. And we might just not want to answer those questions.

In every encounter with Jesus there is compassion and love, but there is also challenge: who are we, what do we really believe and what are we doing about it?

And prayer can be a bit like going into the lion’s den: the good news is that God is with us in there. But the bad news is: God is with us in there.

When the disciples finally despaired sufficiently to wake Jesus up, his authority as the Creator of the world calms the storm and confronts them with: Have you no faith?

In Jesus’ own ministry he regularly upset people; it was part of the deal, because he challenged existing power structures in both society and the religion; he called people to live differently, to change personal and collective behaviours. He shakes the tree; rattles the cages; knocks over the money changers’ tables.

And this is the work we are called to share in: not to make padded seats for the boat so we can ride out the storm in comfort, and not to refuse to go out if it looks as though it might turn stormy, but to get stuck in to the work of bringing in the Kingdom.
People fear miracles because they fear being changed. In this story, the disciples witness a miracle, and they know with a flash of deeply scary insight that this miracle will change them forever. And that frightens them.

Are we, as a community, letting Jesus stay asleep in the back of the boat? Or is he already standing up in the bow, asking: Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?...
 **Amen**