

## Twelfth Sunday of the Year 2021

Mthr Judith Brown

Today's gospel reading is one of two miracles described in St. Mark's gospel, which involve Jesus showing mastery over the sea – in this case by stilling a violent storm. It raises for us the question of how we understand such miracle stories. It's a thorny question and I suspect troubles a lot of sincere Christian believers. I for one still feel uneasy when I hear the story of the healing of the man possessed by many unclean spirits, which is placed in Mark just after today's gospel reading. You will remember that they ask for permission to go into a large herd of pigs, who promptly rush into the lake and are drowned. My reaction tends to be "Poor pigs"; and "poor swineherds and owners" who lost their livelihoods.

Of course this reaction implies a very literal understanding of the miracle stories as if they were simple historical accounts of events. It misunderstands what sort of stories these are: for they are more like extraordinarily vivid ways of teaching profound truths. We shall never know what did happen in these sorts of occasions. Jesus clearly did work many miracles, and of course there were other miracle workers around too. But Jesus always seems to have resisted the temptation to be seen as a wonder-worker, as a purveyor of miracles. This had been a temptation in the wilderness after his baptism, and it probably also accounts for the way he insisted that so many of those who had been healed should keep quiet about it. For him what was important was what lay behind the healing or the casting out of evil spirits - not the apparent miracle itself. What these showed was the work of God in the world, the fact that the Kingdom of God had come among them, and when people responded in faith things happened.

Given the way the gospel writers recount these stories, we need to learn how to "read" them and to "hear" them. They have a language embedded in Jewish scripture, which would have been entirely comprehensible to those for whom the gospels were written, and to whom they were first read. But as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century Augustine of Hippo, writing on the gospel of John, was warning about concentrating on the wonder element and guiding people to what lay behind: "Because Christ is the Word of God, all the acts of the Word become words to us....a miracle is not like a picture,

something merely to look at and admire, and to be left at that. It is much more like a piece of writing which we must learn to read and understand.”

Let us turn back to the stilling of the great storm. To “read” this in the way Augustine suggested, we need to understand the imagery of the sea in the Old Testament. It is the place of chaos, and only God can set bounds to it, and control its power. In today’s Psalm (No.107) we hear one of the most famous passages in the psalms about seafarers seeing the works of the Lord and his wonders in the deep. When they cry out to him in fearful storms he delivers them. “For he maketh the storm to cease: so that the waves thereof are still.” (v.29) Our Old Testament reading from Job echoes this image of God being the master of the waves, the one who controls chaos. When God answers Job out of the whirlwind he says, “Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb ...and set bounds for it ... and said, “Thus far shall you come and no further, and here shall your proud waves be stopped.” Job 38: 8-11) Or there is the lovely little story of Jonah who is thrown into the sea by his fellow sailors when they realise he is running away from God. They cast him into the depths of chaos and evil forces – but God saves even there with an obliging whale! (Incidentally the image of the sea as the place of chaos and evil helps to explain the disaster which befell the poor pigs when the evil spirits inhabited them after leaving the afflicted man. They rushed into their proper place, the place of chaos where evil spirits should be rather than troubling humans!)

So the miracle story at its heart tells us who Christ is. He does the work Jews knew was God’s work. Through his life divine power is made manifest and is at work defeating the powers of chaos, confusion and evil. Mark makes this even clearer in the second miracle story about Jesus stilling a storm. When the disciples were terrified at the sight of Jesus walking on the water and thought he was a ghost, the Lord told them to take heart and assured them that he was truly himself. But the Greek reveals much more. He uses the words “I Am” (ego eimi) - the only permissible name for God, and of course one which the writer of John uses in the great “I am” sayings. So Mark is saying that these miraculous calmings of storms were not just wonders. They were signs that God was among them in the person of Jesus.

But hearing the miracle stories is also a way of listening for our own times and situations to the Word of God – the Word whose works are words – to use St. Augustine’s most helpful phrase.

We need to recognise that these stories take very seriously the powers which are hostile to the loving purposes of God. The church has often been very good at making people aware of personal sin, and implanting a horrible and sometimes pathological sense of guilt which is quite unChristian. But on the whole Christians have not taken as seriously the forces of evil which inhabit the wider world beyond the individual – the evils in many societies and social situations, the seemingly demonic possession which can engulf institutions and groups, the use of political power to belittle and even silence and obliterate one’s supposed enemies, the assumptions in society about what is of value, and who is worthy of value and emulation and who is not. We may not often talk of demons and evil spirits today but the reality behind this older language is still very present. There are still “principalities and powers” working against the values of love and reconciliation which are hallmarks of the Kingdom of God. We, too, need to take them seriously and to work to align ourselves with the values of the Kingdom. We may feel quite overwhelmed and wonder what on earth each of us as individuals can do about such great forces of evil. But each person whose life is open to the dynamic of Love which is at the heart of the Kingdom of God makes a difference even if they do not know it. Perhaps Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed we heard last week give us insight into the value of tiny things, small acts of love, little steps of faith. Maybe too this was in the mind of John Henry Newman when he wrote in his famous hymn, *Lead Kindly Light*, “I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me.”

The miracles Mark records about Christ still storms at sea teach that the power of God deals with the storms which are inevitable in human life. His first readers were probably a persecuted church and heard his message in this context. Our storms are somewhat different – but they are there all right and are inevitable in human life. We shall all face in the course of our lives occasions of failure and loss, of doubt and disillusion, of illness and increasing age. The covid pandemic has taught our proud societies much about the fragility of humanity, and about our mortality. But Christ’s presence with us, as with his first disciples, is assurance and peace, if we take the

inner meaning of these miracle stories seriously. This is not an easy “kiss it better” teaching. Rather it says first that Christ is present in all the turbulence and fear. He is not absent. He says to us that we should not be afraid because He Is, and he is with us. More still - God uses all things and circumstances, however disastrous they may seem, to further his own good purposes. Nothing is beyond his redeeming love – no forces of chaos and evil. Everything can become part of his continuing work of redeeming and recreating broken humanity. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God ....” (Romans 8:28).