

Address by Nigel Guthrie for St Michael and All Angels, Mount Dinham, for Sunday 20 June 2021

I've only been to the Holy Land once, back in the mid 1990s. It was a trip organized for the curates of the Diocese of Derby. But they had a few extra spaces and as a new vicar in the diocese I was invited along. It was an intense and memorable experience. We heard about some of the realities of life for the mainly Arab Christian population. We also learned from the layered and complex history of the cities. But the scenes that have stuck in my mind most are of the areas away from the large towns - the River Jordan, the road to Jericho and the Sea of Galilee. I still think of these scenes when I hear the stories connected with these places. We all went out for a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee - and I'm glad to say that it was a lot calmer than the journey described in today's gospel reading!

But the Sea of Galilee is well known for sudden storms whipped up by the winds coming down from the eastern hills. And this is just one of the details that Mark includes in today's dramatic gospel account. He even mentions the cushion on which Jesus laid his head in the boat, one of the touches that help to make his gospel so vivid and realistic.

We know that Jesus had been tired out by the crowd because he asked to go over to the other side of the lake to get away from them. That reminds us of the humanity of Jesus; he got tired and fed up as we all do. It is also touching to hear of him sleeping during the journey. But then he is woken by his disciples in a panic. "Teacher don't you care we are going to die?". Of course, Jesus did care, and with the authority of God he charged the sea to "be still". And then he challenged the disciples over their lack of faith "Why are you afraid. Have you still no faith?" – although I can't say I blame the disciples for their alarm when caught in such a storm! The result of Jesus' calming of the storm was that they were filled with awe as they gained another insight into the divine nature of the man they knew as so well as teacher and friend.

For many of us this past year has felt like a very alarming storm. Unless we are old enough to have lived through the Second World War most of us in this country have never experienced such wholesale disruption to our lives. We have experienced many emotions as the pandemic has continued; fear and anxiety, as we see pictures of people suffering in hospital and learn the sheer scale of global infections; hope, as we learn of vaccinations being developed and as we receive them ourselves; frustration, as plans to return to normal ways of living are postponed. It's been a real storm for us

and we can be grateful that, even though the storm of Covid still rages in many places, calmer waters are now visible here. And like all storms this one will subside but will also have caused lasting damage. We think especially of those bereaved in the pandemic, those with long covid, and everyone who has been most affected economically, educationally and psychologically.

It's good that we should share these concerns with God in our prayers just as the disciples called out in fear as the storm grew, and the boat tossed. "Teacher don't you care that we are going to die". God always hears our cry when we bring our prayers before him. But it's also good that we should acknowledge the majesty and mystery of God. This storm of Covid has reminded us that we are vulnerable and not wholly in control of our own lives. That realisation is tough, but also necessary because as our technical control and domination of the environment has grown, so the harmful effects of our ruthless exploitation of the resources of our world have become ever more apparent. We are blessed to live in Devon where bad weather usually refers to wind and rain rather hurricane, drought and famine. But Covid and its variants are a strong reminder that we are subject to creation as well as influencing it. It is when we remember that that we will develop a healthy and sustainable relationship with it.

The storms in our lives can seem overwhelming, as the storm on the sea of Galilee did to the disciples of Jesus. They had to learn that there was one who was greater than the storm, one who cared about them even though he was asleep. They had to learn to trust and not to be afraid. We need to learn the same and when we face a storm there are no words better than those of psalm 121 to make our own prayer to the God who never slumbers:

I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

Thanks be to God for his care for us in this life and into eternity!

