

12th Sunday (Year B): Stormy Waters!

1st Reading: Job 38:1+8-11: God's majesty seen in the storm;

2nd Reading: 2 Cor 5:14-17: Christ's love is more majestic than anything;

Gospel: Mark 4:35-40: Jesus calms both a stormy lake & the disciples' terror.

Living in a temperate region of mild(ish) winters and cool(ish) summers, we rarely experience the extremes of weather – certainly not on the scale of hot countries like Israel. The Sea of Galilee, a lake surrounded by high hills, was (and still is) notorious for storms that come and go quickly. The Old Testament character Job also went through a violent storm - the story is in the first reading. Both St Mark and the author of the book of Job use the storm experience to show divine majesty and power – something that overwhelms us weak humans. Many of us have experienced storms – they can be both wonderful and frightening; any walker or golfer caught out in the open when there is lightning in a thunderstorm will naturally feel terrified.

I shall deal with the Job reading first. This Old Testament book deals with the hardest of all religious problems: why does a “good” God allow innocent people to suffer? To be honest, the Book of Job is probably a work of fiction: it starts with Job as an unbelievably rich and good man who, being tested by Satan, loses everything except his life – he is reduced to living in a midden, scraping off his rotting skin. He is urged by his wife to curse God; in contrast, his so-called ‘comforters’ or friends want him to admit that must have been a bad sinner after all. He refuses to do either, but still cannot understand why he has had to suffer. Most Jews thought that suffering was the result of sin; so, when an innocent person suffered, there was the difficulty of trying to explain it. (This was why many Jews were scandalized years later, when early Christians said Jesus was a suffering, but innocent, Messiah.)

This Sunday's first reading gives us God's words to Job, to make him appreciate God's power over creation: *“Who pent up the sea behind closed doors, and marked the bounds it was not to cross, and made it fast with a bolted gate?”* (This bit is clearly chosen to match the calming of the sea-storm in the gospel.) But we do not get to hear Job's reaction to this experience of God's power: Job repents – not of sins that he had not committed – but for questioning God's purpose in the first place. For the author, there are mysteries which we cannot grasp; one of these being innocent suffering. Years later, Jesus had to face this himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane. There is no clear answer to it.

The gospel is the famous calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee. As I said earlier, storms on this lake come suddenly; the apostles could not have foreseen the risk: that is why they set sail. If you read the story in a Bible, or in a post-1970 missal, you notice the very human, eye-witness detail: Jesus *'was in the stern; his head on the cushion, asleep'*. Those boats were quite big, with sails, but they were also hard to row, when things went wrong – like now. St Mark almost certainly took the story from his “boss” in Rome, St Peter, and he does not spare the apostles’ embarrassment – they were panicking. They woke Jesus and said: *“Master, do you not care? We are going down!”* Jesus immediately *“woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Quiet now! Be calm!’ And the wind dropped, and all was calm again.”* After that, he criticized the apostles for their lack of faith in him. Their response: *“Who can this be? Even the wind and sea obey him.”*

I should like to make two points here. First: for many years, some have debunked Jesus’ miracles – especially ‘nature’ miracles, such as this. They argue that they take away from Jesus’ human nature, and spoil the effect of his social teaching as “one of us”. I cannot agree. The two basic biblical teachings about him are:- (1) He is the Son of the Creator God, made flesh in Mary by a miracle of the Holy Spirit; (2) He rose from the dead after his execution, to offer us eternal life as well. If we write the ‘supernatural’ out of Jesus’ life, we reduce the New Testament to a social commentary, and deny its power to change our lives. The previous paragraph shows the gospels’ ‘human’ element.

Secondly: relating this gospel to us today, we know Jesus is not around to calm our ‘storms’ – problems affecting our lives – by miracles like this one. We believe that miracles can (& sometimes do) happen – but we cannot rely on them as regular solutions. When we build ‘God’s Kingdom’, which means arranging the world to the best of our Christian conscience, we organize it to be safe and healthy. At the emotional level, “storms” represent times of worry, stress, depression, and so on. The causes can be physical or spiritual. We are all different, but I can say that an awareness of Jesus’ own sufferings, coupled with his divine presence and power, can help us through a lot. In a nutshell, this is what St Paul is saying in the 2nd reading, when he writes: *“Living people should live no longer for themselves, but for Christ, who died and was raised to life for them...For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation.”* For this to work, what we do need is a basic faith – something which Jesus’ friends in that boat on the Sea of Galilee, sadly, did not have. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

