

## Sermon for 20<sup>th</sup> February 2022, Year C, 2<sup>nd</sup> before Lent

### Preached at St Michael Smarden

#### Luke 8:22-25

#### Sermon

On Friday when Storm Eunice was at its height, we lost power at the rectory and the mobile phone signal in Biddenden also stopped working, so this meant no internet, telly or radio, or phone calls, even on the landline which has a base station on mains power. After visiting a parishioner earlier in the morning, I'd rather hoped to spend the day updating our church website and preparing pew sheets for this morning, but instead I picked up my fully charged laptop and started to work on my sermon.

It was at this point that I realised the gospel reading for today involved the disciples panicking during a storm and waking Jesus, who immediately calms the wind and waves before criticising them for their lack of faith.

Oh dear, how awkward that storm Eunice did not exactly respond to *our* prayers either. Still, at least we can identify with the terrified disciples!

Given the dramatic nature of this short scene, which appears in the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it's not surprising that Christian theologians and preachers have searched deeply in it over the years for meanings and applications for modern life.

One obvious metaphor begins by pointing to the fact that the storm comes when Jesus is asleep. "Don't leave Jesus sleeping in your boat" came the inevitably pithy advice. In other words, don't forget Jesus until Sundays; instead, pray and walk with him all the week long.

Some preachers went further, suggesting that storms occur in your life because you've forgotten Jesus, but this is harsh and unhelpful. Many metaphorical storms such as sickness or injury come whether we are saints or sinners, and whether we pray all day or not at all. We mustn't blame someone's lack of faith for any suffering they encounter. This is clearly not how the world works.

On the other hand, there are occasions when a strong faith can certainly soothe emotional or psychological distress. If you firmly believe that God is real and loves you as a beloved child, then even when difficult things do happen, as they surely will, you are perhaps more able to respond with a gentle and calm spirit, able to continue to care for others with kindness even when you yourself are in pain or distress.

This is the true indication of a strong and sincere faith in my view – when a person is suffering deep pain in illness or trauma and yet is still able to be kind to others. One meets it often in those who, even though they know they are dying, are still reaching out with love for those around them. And we saw this in Jesus himself, who, even when he was being crucified, offered consolation to one of the men being executed with him, and ensured that his mother Mary would be cared for by his disciple John.

And so, we may start to think of faith not as a superpower that can literally move mountains and calm storms, but as a way of responding with love, gentleness, kindness, and forgiveness even during awful circumstances. We do not calm the storm so much as find peace and equanimity within it.

A second lesson we might learn from this story is how tempting it is to rely on someone else to sort out our problems for us. When Jesus says, "Where is your faith?" he's not accusing them of lacking faith, but rather of not putting their faith into practice.

About twenty years ago in my early 30s, I was a very dedicated student of a particular form of martial arts, and I would attend a local gym three or four evenings a week for training with an instructor. On one occasion, when I had studied for long enough to be considered an intermediate student, my instructor suddenly and randomly attempted to punch me during a conversation, just to see how I would instinctively respond. I was totally surprised by this and just stood there as he stopped his punch about an inch from my face. “Where is your kung fu?” he demanded. He wasn’t saying that I didn’t have any skill – he was challenging me to think about why I hadn’t chosen to put my skill to good use in that moment.

My excuse was – quite reasonably I thought – that I didn’t expect my teacher to attack me randomly during a polite conversation. But his point was well-made. The whole point of the training was so that I would respond instinctively with the skills and understanding I had been given. Likewise, the disciples on the boat had been trained to respond instinctively with faith in a loving God. They, and I, failed the test, because we hadn’t yet developed a mature faith or understanding, independent of our teacher telling us exactly what to do.

As anyone who has ever tried to learn a new skill will know, it is one thing to follow a teacher’s instructions step by step – it is quite another to decide the next step for yourself. That requires a much deeper understanding and much greater wisdom, and for the disciples this would not come until much later, when Jesus had left them, and they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The third and final message I want to draw out of this gospel reading relates to what the story is telling us about the nature of God, and our relationship to him and with him. Traditionally, in ancient Jewish literature, the sea, the waters, are a sign of chaos. From this perspective, God’s first role is to bring order to chaos by calming the chaos of the sea and creating dry land. This is also why the book of Genesis begins with the Spirit of God hovering over the waters during the

first act of creation. For Jesus to calm the waves during a storm is therefore to demonstrate divine power. Only God has power over the chaos of the ocean. This is why the disciples respond with fear and amazement and cry out, “Who then is this, that he commands even the waves and the water, and they obey him?” They have suddenly seen Jesus as he truly is – as both fully human and yet also divine.

This revelation is key to the whole story of Jesus calming the storm, and it also explains why the lectionary has selected this morning’s two other readings from Genesis and Revelation, which you will find on your pew sheet. The reading from Genesis shows us a time when humanity’s relationship with God was personal and intimate – Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. In contrast, the reading from Revelation displays the awe-inspiring glory of God, transcendent, all-powerful, inaccessible, terrifying, infinitely beyond us. Once Eden was lost to us, how can we possibly know God as loving father? The answer comes of course in Jesus. He is both fully human and fully divine. He calms the storms like almighty God but needs sleep just as we do. He is the bridge between a transcendent God and the closeness of a loving human parent. He shows us that the God of eternal glory is the same God who walked in the garden with his human children. Do we dare to have faith in such a God? What would that look like for us?