

Trinity 10th, 9.30 Eucharist

1 Kings 19: 9-18, Romans 10: 5-15 and Matthew 14: 22-33

Mother Alice

Power of Creation – where is God? Vulnerability begets grace – God

Around the sea of Galilee in the northern part of Israel, storms are a frequent occurrence. The lake can be so calm, and then all of a sudden a storm whips up and the waves become wild. The drama of nature is certainly humbling and majestic, and our readings this morning reflect on this question of where God is in the storm. Where is God when the wind howls, the waves batter and the storm rages? Where is God when we step out in faith, trusting in Him, only to find ourselves doubting, falling, drowning? What does God wish to reveal to us through these processes of vulnerability and fear? How do we seek Him through something frightening and overwhelming? How is our faith impacted by storms? Of course our Scripture reading speak of physical storms, but these storms for many of us are less physically weather related, and more internal emotional or spiritual. We all experience them, and this morning I want us to reflect on how they challenge or grow our faith.

Now Elijah was seeking refuge from the Israelites who were trying to kill Him, and in his place of refuge cried out to God. It's an incredible story, referenced in that verse in the hymn Dear Lord and Father of Mankind – *'speak through the earthquake, wind and fire, O still small voice of calm'*. Elijah is told the Lord is about to pass by and so stands on the mountain and experiences the most terrifying extreme weather. The wind is so strong that rocks are breaking off the mountains and crashing down all around him, then there is an earthquake, then there is a fire, and then suddenly all is still. And it is in this stillness that finally Elijah discerns the Lord, hears his voice, and is given the reassurance that he seeks. Elijah is told that he must return to Damascus to anoint a new king and a new prophet, and that the Lord will spare the lives of those Israelites who have not worshipped foreign gods. We are left wondering what the purpose of the extreme weather was, if the Lord was not in it. Was it a test of faith, of patience, of endurance? Was it necessary to prepare Elijah to really hear what the Lord was about to say? Or was the purpose instructive and theological, revealing that God is Lord over all creation, and works always to bring peace and order? Well, you can make up your own mind, but it seems to me that the peace after the storm was what had the most impact on Elijah, what seemed to draw him close to the Lord, and what gave him the confidence in his next steps. I wonder if this resonates in your own live, that faith grows not during the storm, but in the silence and quiet when all has died down, when we encounter the peace and consolation of God, and a sense of clarity about our next step?

Our gospel reading is the account of Peter encountering Jesus in the storm – stepping out in faith, then doubting, the reaching safety. In some ways in only a few verses it feels like a microcosm of the authentic experience of the rollercoaster of faith. The disciples experience a storm, and they are really struggling all night, unable to control their boat, unable to sleep, vulnerable and fearful. And as the morning light dawns they see a figure coming towards them on the water, but they are exhausted and terrified and unable to recognise that it is Jesus coming to save them, even when he speaks and tells them not to be afraid. But Peter has this mustard seed of faith and cries out – *'if it is you, command me to come to you on the water'*. There's another glimpse of this 'I believe – help my unbelief' motif that we often see when people encounter Jesus. Peter knows that only Jesus can save him, he has enough faith to recognise that Jesus is the one he wants to be with, Jesus the one he wants to get to, and this faith gives him the confidence to step out of the boat – step out of the

place that should be providing safety and yet isn't. It's a terrifying leap of faith. I wonder if you have been in a place like this – where what should have been safe is actually not – where you have found yourself crying out to God to help you to leave, to draw close to him, to find safety elsewhere? Well Peter steps out of the boat, and then realises that the wind and waves are still far too strong, and in his panic and doubt he begins to sink. Again, such a common experience of faith – that we make a decision, we go for it, we're brave and faithful, and seeking God's will – and then so quickly we panic, we lose faith, we want to turn back but we can't, and all feels hopeless. But just look at Jesus' response. He immediately reached out his hand and caught him. He immediately reached out his hand and caught him. What an incredible image. What a comforting verse. Jesus does not desire for us to suffer. He does not desire for us to dwell in a place of fear and discomfort. He brings us to safety, he restores and builds our faith. He brings us peace.

For both Elijah and Peter – faith came through the storm. It came through the fear, the uncertainty, the searching for God, the expectation of encountering God. Grace came through the vulnerability, safety through the danger, hope through the doubt. I do not believe that God's will is for us to suffer but I do see so clearly in the pages of Scripture a God who comes to meet us, takes our hand, and leads us home to safety. I see a God who brings order to chaos, peace to the raging storms, a God who calls us by name so that we can hear his voice and see clearly amidst the surrounding gloom.

And I think that the faith that grows through these storms of life is faith which is not just for us, but is testimony and faith that we are to share, for the building up of the people of God. Paul's challenge exhortation to all of us is: how are they to know if they are not told? God is in the storm! God is with you. You can cry out and he will hear you, you can hold out your hand and he will hold you. Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

As I was preparing to speak this week, I was also packing our suitcase for our summer holiday. And I leave you with this final reflection.

This evening my family and I will cross the English Channel. We will do so on a large vessel, in safety, with documents granting us legal passage to France, with adequate food, water, comfort. As we travel it's a sobering thought that there will be many hundreds coming in the opposite direction, on vessels that are flimsy, with no proper safety precautions, with little food, water or possessions. As we travel with excitement and anticipation of our holiday, they travel with fear and uncertainty. And both my family and those migrants are just people, crossing a body of water, wanting to live lives that are fulfilling and meaningful. The injustices of humanity are none the more obvious where travel and resource are concerned: if we travel in freedom and safety with documents that ensure us welcome then we are extraordinarily privileged. And yet even I set off with some sense of trepidation – a body of water has a very humbling impact. We are vulnerable upon it, we are in awe of it, we see its beauty and also its power. There's a reason why one of the most popular hymns of all time is:

*Eternal Father strong to save
Whose arm has bound the restless wave
Who bids the mighty ocean deep
It's own appointed limits keep
O hear us when we cry to Thee
For those in Peril on the sea*

As we reflect on the majesty of God, his power to save, his faithfulness through the storms of life, and the peace which strengthens our faith, we pray for so many people swept up in danger upon the mountains and the seas – those without faith, and those without aid. May they too know the salvation of God, His mercy and His grace.

Amen.