

Trinity 16 - Matins,
Rev'd Emma Dinwiddy Smith
Matthew 8: 23-end

Living in Kensington, and especially for those who have not yet ventured far afield since lockdown, storms at sea may seem quite a distant concept.

Of course, we are aware of them when we see the seagulls flocking inland to sit in peace on the Round Pond – and unusually quite a number were affected by the freak rainstorms which caused considerable damage and disruption here last month.

Yet we read or hear constantly of those whose lives are turned upside by hurricanes or flooding, those who spend their lives at sea to maintain peace and families who take to small boats on dangerous waters as they risk everything to flee from danger, persecution or economic ruin.

We might also remember today, as we think of Seymour Dallas, a former curate of this parish, of those missionaries who set off courageously across the sea, like the disciples, to bring the good news to others.

Our Gospel story today started off with a very concrete description of a storm blowing up on a lake.

Lake Gennesaret, in the North of Galilee, is surrounded by hills, with deep gorges in between.

The lake is generally quite sheltered, but occasionally cold gusts of air from the West rush down the gorges, stirring up quite sudden and violent storms, which may stop and start with no warning, and such violent and unexpected squalls would have left small fishing boats feeling very exposed and vulnerable.

It is when faced with the natural forces of wind and waves, in the middle of the open sea, that one becomes more aware of the physical power of God's creation, which we in the cities, may feel we have managed to conceal and subdue.

Humankind may have learned to harness such forces for our benefit – or indeed to exploit them for selfish gain, but, like King Canute, we shall never possess the power fully to command the wind and the waves.

One of the effects of the story of Jesus stilling the storm is therefore to remind us of just who he was, and what enormous words of power were at his disposal.

It links him firmly with images of God in the Old Testament, whose power is frequently manifested in his control over the elements.

We might all remember the parting of the Red Sea, but perhaps fewer would today think immediately of the words of Psalm 107:

At his word the stormy wind ariseth, which lifteth up the waves...

Faced with Jesus' authority over the storm, the disciples and the very early followers of Christ, who knew the Old Testament Scriptures intimately, might have recalled the next verse of the Psalm:

*When they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, he delivereth them out of their distress.
For he maketh the storm to cease so that the waves thereof are still.* Gradually we are witnessing understanding dawning upon the disciples that Jesus shared in God's wondrous works.

The subtext of Jesus' question, "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" in response to the disciples' terror, may also have been that they should have trusted the Scriptures better, and known that God can rescue his children, even from the storm.

As so often, the example of the disciples is there to demonstrate to us that we are in good company, when we, too, forget what we have been told a hundred times, or when we let our faith waver in the face of fear.

We Londoners may never, or only very occasionally, find ourselves literally in a small boat in the middle of a terrifying storm, but we are not immune to feeling "swamped" by waves of fear, pain, anger, or grief.

We, together with the whole world, have this past year experienced the sudden blowing up of an overwhelming crisis no-one had predicted.

But Psalm 107 says of the sailors after God's stilling of the storm:

Then are they glad because they are at rest and so he bringeth them unto the haven where they would be.

Much of Christ's message and the lessons of the Gospel, are about the peace which is to be found in faith.

The "peace of God, which passes all understanding" does not deny the storms of grief or hurt, or the feelings of being swamped by despair or exhaustion or fear which we will all experience at some time if we live our life to the full.

God's peace works to "keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of Christ", so that an awareness of his healing and calming presence can be with us, even in the midst of crisis.

It can be easy to "proclaim our faith in the words of the Creed" when we are gathered cosily together in the holy atmosphere of church on a Sunday, but it can be harder to cling on to that faith as we go out to face the storms outside.

A Biblical reader might naturally assume that a boat carrying all the disciples, who, after all, formed the foundation of God's Church, to say nothing of carrying the Son of God himself, would be preserved from encountering dangerous and stormy weather.

But gliding quietly over a glassy sea is not automatically the path of the Christian – in this life at least.

God does not promise that we will not experience the storms – and the example of Christ's life shows us that suffering may be part of our journey.

But what this Gospel story could be telling us is that even as we face the storm, if we maintain our faith in God's love, we will be conscious of him protecting us, and bearing us up, and he will, of course, bring us all at last, like the seafarers in the psalm, to "the haven where we would be".

When we sing hymns such as "Eternal Father, strong to save", we remember not only those who literally risk their lives as they put out to sea, but also those known – or unknown - to us who may at this time be afraid of drowning in a sea of anxiety or grief or exhaustion, and ask for God's peace to be with them. Amen.