

Constructing a new world order (1): stilling the storm (Mark 4: 35-41)

Jesus Stills a Storm

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.'³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.³⁷ A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.⁴⁰ He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

“Who on earth *is* this guy?” That’s how the gospel passage ends (4:41), with Jesus’ closest friends – the ones who should have known him best – discovering more and more how *little* they know and understand him. They are discovering something in Jesus that is true in human relating: getting to know someone is not a “flat”, linear process. It is not about getting to know “facts” or “mere information” about them, but being drawn into the mystery of their otherness. The other person does things that shock or surprise us. We’re jolted. We didn’t expect it, and we don’t like it. This person who seems so “like me” has just done something that I wouldn’t *dream* of doing! It appears to run counter to everything I’ve known until now. This is about being confronted with their individuality – their otherness and difference. We’re suddenly aware of the fact that we do not “control” them. They’re unpredictable.

That’s when friendships change. They have to. They move into a different phase. They will either deepen, becoming relationships of mutual engagement and negotiation, or they may well fall apart in disillusionment: “I found I didn’t know her/him after all!”

That's the point the disciples have begun to reach in their relationship with Jesus. The question, "Who is this guy?" is not an appeal for information! It's a baffled acknowledgement that they are in for a (boat!) ride that they hadn't actually signed up for. They recognise something fundamental both about human relationships and about faith in Jesus: getting to know Jesus can be wonderful, exciting, high-octane, disturbing, offensive ... the point is, you can't get to know Jesus and stay the same! Being close to Jesus means having to make decisions; means changing. And in this particular journey of friendship with Jesus, it is Jesus who sets the terms. Jesus, like his counterpart, Aslan, in the Narnia Chronicles, is not a *tame* lion!

Mark 4:34 concludes the opening section of Jesus' ministry. We are about to enter a new phase in the narrative, and it is marked by the lake crossing – Jesus saying "Let's go across to the other side" (4:35). There is symbolic significance here in terms of the narrative. Mark makes extensive narrative-symbolic use of place and movement, and here Jesus is crossing from the "Jewish" side of the lake to the "Gentile" side to begin a new phase in his ministry. On arrival, he will be confronted immediately by the Gerasene demoniac.

Mark, we must remember, presents Jesus as the one who binds the Strong Man (Satan). His ministry is a ministry of confrontation with the powers that threaten and imprison human beings. Mark's Jesus is a Liberator. And here, at this moment of transition, Jesus confronts and defeats a storm at sea.

If that sounds a peculiar way of putting it, look at how Mark shapes the story. Sudden, violent storms are common on Galilee. But this is a lake, not the sea! By casting this as a sea voyage, Mark is quite deliberately evoking the biblical symbols of the sea as a place of chaos

and danger. That's the first point to note.

The second is that Mark casts the stilling of the storm in terms of an exorcism. Jesus "rebukes" the wind and the "sea", literally saying to them, "Be muzzled!" "Rebuking" and "muzzling" are technical terms for an exorcism (cf the very first exorcism at Capernaum in 1:25). If we read this as a "nature miracle", we are missing the point that Mark is trying so hard to make! The power of Jesus that is displayed here is not that of a "miracle worker" so much as an exorcist and liberator. The biblical tradition describes creation as disordered. Paul talks about it "groaning in bondage". Its deadly power is a sign of disorder: creation is meant to give life. Yet all of created reality is symbolically described as being under a "malign power". It isn't free. One answer, therefore, to the disciples' question in 4:41 is, "This is the Liberator king of the universe!"

The disciples' failure to "get" Jesus

Finally, we need to note that this transition piece in the gospel has a theological parallel to the change in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples that we were considering earlier. Mark has set us up in 4:34 to assume that Jesus will reveal himself in a special way to his disciples – and this is precisely what is happening in this incident! The trouble is, instead of the disciples going, "Ah! I see!" they are left puzzled, wondering who on earth (no pun intended!) Jesus is! Why?

This is part of the Messianic Secret motif in the gospel. Jesus is revealing himself as the Messiah – but *not* the sort of Messiah that the disciples are interested in having! Jesus' messiahship entails suffering and death – and that is not on the disciples' messianic agenda. What Mark signals here is the start of an increasing alienation between Jesus and the disciples, caused not by a diminishing of his affection for them

but by their refusal to allow him to be who he really is. They want to write the messianic script – to “control” Jesus. As the gospel unfolds from this point onwards, their attempts to dissuade Jesus from his course of action will cause more and more friction. Increasingly, Mark marginalises the disciples from the significant action that happens around Jesus. They want to make Jesus in their own image of what a Messiah ought to be, and so Mark will develop the theme of the disciples’ blindness more fully. Ironically, more and more, it is the very group to whom Jesus wants to reveal himself that is least able to see and hear. Their relationship with Jesus has reached crunch point. Either they are going to walk *with* Jesus and learn to grow and change, or there will be a parting of the ways. They elect to stay – for now – but to resist Jesus and to seek to manipulate him. It won’t work. The final parting of the ways takes place in Gethsemane, when they will all flee. Restoration, understanding and appreciation lie only on the other side of the cross.

Jesus refuses domestication! Discipleship is not a guarantee in and of itself that we “get” Jesus. Church history is littered with spectacular failures of the Church in this regard: Christendom, the Inquisition, the oppression of women, Apartheid, the Holocaust, the Religious Right. The Jesus who is on the side of the poor and the marginalised, who welcomes sinners and who comes to liberate humanity from all that threatens and destroys flourishing and life is a constant thorn in the side to a middle-class, respectable Church.

Taking Jesus seriously is constantly to be amazed, affronted and challenged. It is to face up to the things about Jesus, his message and his mission that we dislike and wish fervently were different. We need to face up to our tendencies to control him; remake him in our own image; resist the changes he urges on *us* through the Spirit. How can

we begin to do that? We can be honest: these are the things that make us afraid. The changes he wants to make in us generate fear - good, old-fashioned, paralysing terror! The future of the Church can look pretty bleak just at the moment. Like the disciples in the boat, we long to shake Jesus and say, "Wake up! How can you be asleep at a time like this! Don't you care that we're perishing?" If that's how we feel, then let's be honest about it - because only then will we hear the words of Jesus: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" This is the One whom even the winds and seas obey!

Going deeper into the text (Mark 4: 35-41)

Do you ever sit in church and feel a tension within you as you hear the two voices of faith whisper to you? There is a voice that whispers, "This is what I *should* think/believe..." Then you hear the counter-whisper that suggests you might harbour other thoughts. In our story today about Jesus calming the storm, I very much hear two voices.

I hear one thought telling me that if it says in Mark that Jesus calmed the storm, then I should believe that's what happened. The other thought is, "How can this story be anything other than a narrative device - an invention of Mark to impart an important truth about Jesus - but not historically true. How can a truly human Jesus display dominion over the elements?"

I have a gentle war of thoughts playing out in my head, and as with all

illicit thoughts, I end up feeling guilty. Some part of me feels that the way of faith is not to harbour questions about Scripture. It feels illicit, and I have to work hard to convince myself that it's not something to be embarrassed about. So I remind myself that Scripture has always been questioned by some people:

- In 1680 Benedict Spinoza argued that the author of the Pentateuch was Ezra, not Moses
- in 1678 Richard Simon argued that much of the Old Testament originated within scribal schools, rather than from individuals
- More recently, David Jenkins, then-bishop of Durham, told a BBC presenter that he doubted God would have arranged a virgin birth or for Jesus to walk on water

At the same time, I also know that those who have questioned Scripture have often had their faith and integrity questioned. Sometimes the folk that ask the hard questions have been hard done to in return.

- In 1697 a Scottish student, Thomas Akenhead, was hanged at the age of 20 for blasphemy: he claimed that Ezra wrote the Pentateuch
- In the 18th century, Thomas Wooston was sentenced to a year in prison for suggesting that the miracles of Jesus didn't actually happen
- In our own era, David Jenkins was lampooned as the bishop who didn't believe the Bible, and was alleged to be responsible for God striking York Minster with a thunderbolt as punishment

And so I hear the voices, but I keep quiet. I have the questions, but I don't voice them, in case I am thought less of. You can't stop yourself having naughty questions, but we are taught to keep them to ourselves. Yet the feelings of unease at my lack of congruence

grow. So for my own sake, let me say it out loud: "I am not sure that Jesus calmed the storm!" There - I've said it out loud, because that's the question I wrestle with inside, and I have decided it's better out than in.

And you know, having been honest about my questions, my faith, my inner voices, I feel less guilty. Maybe we should all be honest about what we think and feel. Maybe church is the very place where we can share all our thoughts and all our questions about Jesus. As Paul reminds us in Romans:

Neither height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of Jesus that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!
(Romans 8:38-9)

I do not believe that questions about Jesus, whether voiced or silent, can ever distance us from God.

Questions for reflection

Listen to or read the lyrics of Martyn Joseph's song, *Cherish the Questions*:

*Locked in my heart there's a child
Knocking the door to get out
Asking the questions that hurt and
Sometimes there's a question of doubt
I can't pretend that it's easy
I can't pretend that I win
When your search in this life is over
That's when the struggle begins*

*And if I don't find out the search is not in vain
And if I don't find out I
Treasure the questions as they rage in my mind
I treasure the questions some day I will find
I ran out of answers such a long time ago*

*And I treasure the questions wherever I go
Searching Sahara's of sorrow
Trying to understand why
But the journey has brought me so much closer
I don't have to stand here and lie
Over and over I cried in the darkness
Over and over to see
The crime is to sit and not wonder
Renewing my mind set me free
And if I don't find out the search is not in vain
And if I don't find out I
Treasure the questions as they rage in my mind
I treasure the questions some day I will find*

*I ran out of answers such a long time ago
And I treasure the questions wherever I go
(Martyn Joseph)*

- What questions (our inner voices) do we have about Jesus?
- How do we feel/react when someone says or thinks something about Jesus we would never say or think?
- When have you been (or tempted to be) less than honest about what you believe about Jesus?
- Is it hard to be honest in church? If so, why?
- Have you ever been in the position of the disciples, where

someone thinks you have "little faith"?

All age worship ideas Mark 4: 35-41

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

Thoughts:

This is one of those passages that lends itself well to getting the whole congregation involved. Get a recording of a storm with strong winds or get people to make the sounds with cardboard and 'whooshing'. If you get the congregation to click their fingers to start the sound of rain then slowly start to pat their thighs building the sound while others make the noise of the wind and waves it can be quite effective.

If you use a recording the congregation can play the part of the disciples in the boat. Get them to row and sway as the storm swells. Build up the sense of panic that they might drown. Have some water pistols to squirt those who won't be too offended as the water splashes up the side of the boat.

If you are using the congregation to make the sound effects have a small group miming out the parts of the disciples and Jesus in the boat. Build up to a crescendo then let it go completely still after the cry of 'Peace' before continuing.

Think about the 'storms' that impact on people's lives today. These may be personal, community or globally linked. Invite people to consider where Jesus needs to speak peace over their lives, and how through them he might be seeking to promote peace over the lives and situations of others.

Prayer idea:

Psalm 46.10 'Be still and know that I am God' can also be translated 'Stop fighting and know that I am God' – For the prayers you could have an olive tree, sometimes known as a peace tree, where people could come and hang their prayers. Have some teardrop shaped pieces of card and string to hang with. We cry out to God for the people of the world who fight against him and against each other, thinking especially of those caught in the crossfire. The leaves of the olive tree remind us of the leaves of the tree of life given for the healing of the nations. We put our prayers alongside to symbolise our hope in Jesus the wounded and

risen healer.

Liturgies and hymns Mark 4: 35-41

Opening Prayer

(inspired by Mark 4:35-41)

Mighty God, who speaks a word of peace to calm our troubled sea;
Caring God, who nudges us away from fear and toward faith;
Ever-present God, who fills us with awe
 but also raises many questions
 without easy answers;
Open our eyes to see you in our boat—today,
Strengthen our hearts for the challenges that lie ahead,
Open our ears this hour to hear the word you speak.
This we pray, In Jesus' name. Amen

— posted on the **Long Green Valley Church of the Brethren** website. <http://rockhay.tripod.com/>

Prayer of Approach and Confession

(inspired by Mark 4:35-41)

Lord God of all Creation we come to you from our storm-tossed lives to seek your peace; we come to you with our questions and uncertainties, our worries and anxieties, we come to you from our joy and our happiness-- each emotion a kaleidoscope of our feeling in life's changing patterns.

More than all of that we come to you because of what you have done for us in the love of Christ who bought our freedom by his sacrifice on the Cross and showed us new life in his resurrection life. We bless you for the love which has no dimension of length breadth or height, coming as it does from the perfection your being. We come to you knowing that sometimes we have received your grace in vain.

We have not relied on your word or wisdom, we have not shown any concern or compassion when we should have; we have not loved our neighbour as we love ourselves. We have remained silent when we should have spoken and spoken when we should have been silent.

We seize the moment to ask you from our discordant lives for yet another chance of hearing you say to us *'Your sins are forgiven'*. May the mark of that forgiveness be your grace in us as we respond with grace and gratitude to your love.

Eternal God as we ask that you accept our prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray that from the grace we have received, what we say and what we do will enable those around us to glimpse the life of the your Son -- who calmed the storm with words which still echo down the centuries, *'Peace be still'***Amen.**

— written by the Very Rev. John Christie, and posted on the Church of Scotland's Starters for Sunday website. <http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/> Visit that website for other excellent lectionary-based worship resources.

Loving Through the Storm

(inspired by Mark 4:35-41)

The worst storms, Jesus, are the ones caused
by our fear,
when we grow afraid of losing our power,
or we grow suspicious of the power of others,
when we refuse to acknowledge your mysterious authority;

Yet, it's in the storm that we find our capacity to love.
In releasing our weak claim to power
and opening to your reign,
we discover a new way of seeing ourselves -
as called and useful and beloved -
and the other, whoever they may be -
as dignified and precious and beloved.

Here in the storm, Jesus, we need you, and we need each other,
and the love you give us to share,
leads us through sacrifice and self-giving
to peace and calm,
if only we will loose our hold on fear.

Amen.

— written by John van de Laar. Posted on his excellent [Sacredise.com](http://www.sacredise.com) website.

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Lord God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,
we your people acclaim you,
we praise you, we exalt you,
we bless your holy name.
It is your love that is revealed in the life and death of Jesus,
it is your power that is seen in his resurrection,
and it is your majesty that is made known
by his ascension into heaven to be at your side.
Help us, O God, to always keep your power and your authority
and your love and your majesty in our minds
and to never neglect the doing of your will.
Help us to be obedient to the word you place
in our hearts and our minds...
Lord, hear our prayer...

Father and Mother of us all,
we believe that Christ Jesus should rule within our worship
and our life together as your people.
We believe too that he should rule over our work in the world
and within our family life.
Indeed we profess that he wants to be Lord of our lives,
the one who is supreme in deciding how we should relate
to our friends and our neighbours.
Help us make this manifest in what we do each and every day—
in how we make decisions about how we spend our time and our
money,
in how we employ our hands and in how we direct our feet,
in how we speak and in how we think,
in how we rest and in how we work...
Lord, hear our prayer...

O God, in his time with us
Christ has shown his authority over wind and wave.
We pray that he may bring peace and calm to those who lives are
troubled....
We especially pray today for (*bidding prayer*)...
Lord, hear our prayer....

Thank you, God most Holy, for hearing our prayers.
All these things we ask of you in the name of Christ Jesus,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, both now and forevermore. **Amen.**

~ written by Rev. Richard Fairchild, and posted on the **Kir-
shalom** website.<http://www.rockies.net/>

Hymns

Eternal Father strong to save -R&S 58

Be still, my soul, wait upon – R&S 729

Love Divine, or love excelling- R&S 663

Let's go across : Tune R&S 567

Christ calls us as disciples
to tread unknown terrain,
embark on new adventures
and change ourselves again.
'Let's go across the water,
on to the other side,'
and if a storm should greet us,
may peace and faith abide.

By faith we're called to follow
though like a mustard seed
we know our hope is fragile
and yearns to be set free:
but we are called in weakness
as waves crash all around,
God knowing our potential:
may peace and faith abound!

By faith we must remember
we've not passed here before;
this way eludes our mapping;
we're safer on the shore:
but we are called to follow
God's promises ahead
which break the flowing torrents:
in hope we too shall tread!

Christ, call us as disciples
to what we do not know,
to where the Spirit prompts us:
that mustard seeds might grow!
Let's go across the waters,
beyond what we can see,
that as your promise shapes us,
new worlds shall dare to be!

© Graham Adams (2012)

Suggested tune: Thornbury

Written for the service marking the move of CWM's offices from London

to Singapore

Based on Mark 4: 30-41 and Joshua 3: 1-17

Explanation for hymn (for *Worship Live*)

There are various influences at work in this hymn. 'Thy hand, O God, has guided' seems a sensible choice of a hymn in the context of a missionary movement which wants to mark the continuity of its heritage with the dynamism of its ongoing life, though it also raises questions in the context of religious unity and diversity today. The tune, 'Thornbury', which is typically set to it, carries a congregation well, so I wanted that heritage and good tune to provide some of the waves on which new words could sail. I am also convinced by Ched Myers in *Binding the Strong Man: a political reading of Mark's story of Jesus* (Orbis, 1988), who argues that the 'crossing of the sea' miracle/story speaks to the situation where Jews and Gentiles broadly inhabited different sides of the lake, so the commission to 'go across' was an invitation to demonstrate racial reconciliation. This is present when I write about the challenge today to 'go across' in the context of a missionary partnership seeking to express its equality - though the metaphor also brings to mind all sorts of hopes that disciples of Jesus may find that courage to 'go across', to see things from new angles, through other people's eyes, in solidarity with each other. Finally, the Bible reading from Joshua was read at my ordination ten years ago, where the focus was the realisation that 'you have not passed this way before'. While some people emphasise that 'there is nothing new under the sun', I am more inclined to believe, even where experiences have similarities and resonances with previous ones, there is still something new and unknown, so courage is required. This is true in our individual journeys and in our corporate attempts to step out. In all these adventures and challenges, God's en-couraging peace is with us, no matter how fragile our faith.