

Reflection for Sunday 20 June

The story of the disciples stuck in a tiny storm-tossed boat rang loud bells for the early church. It spoke to them vividly of their experience of battling to survive in a hostile world, with the horrors of persecution all too familiar. Early Christian symbols, therefore, didn't just include the cross or a fish (that's another story) but also that of a boat. We find it carved in the catacombs of Rome and then throughout Christian history. In some instances, it looks rather like Noah's Ark, another reminder of how God would not abandon his faithful people.

You won't, I suspect, be surprised to learn that scholars argue about whether or not the story St Mark tells really happened in the exactly way he relates, or whether it was a richly symbolic piece of godly imagination – a reflection on who Jesus really is. We'll never know and perhaps it really doesn't matter.

Some of the incidental details like the 'other boats' that then just drop out of the story sound to me like the stuff of an authentic memory – not something you'd make up - because it adds nothing important at all to the point of the story. But would such highly experienced fishermen, so well used to the fickle weather that can create sudden, violent storms on Galilee really have been so petrified and helpless in such circumstances?

The point of the story is what really matters and that it is that it still and always reminds us that God in Jesus Christ is with us, even in the most terrifying moments of our lives, and can calm the storms of our lives now.

Of course, there was also much food for thought in the story beyond this main truth and any other parallel with the tale of Noah and his Ark. The Old Testament encourages us to imagine the sea as a symbol of chaos and evil. We read that God continually overcomes such forces to bring peace, order and hope beginning with the Genesis story of creation itself.

God's power over the sea and all it represents is later movingly expressed, for example, in the poetry of the Book of Job and in the story of the Exodus when God parts the waters of the Red Sea to allow the people of Israel to escape their Egyptian pursuers. But Psalm 107 goes further and even seems to anticipate Mark's story about Jesus. God raises the storm and then stills it: *He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.*

St Mark wants his readers to grasp still more truths too. One of the consistent themes of his Gospel is the disciples' exasperating inability to understand what Jesus's ministry is making possible – even though it's unfolding in front of their very eyes. To emphasise his point, their cries of panic are the very first words Mark puts on their lips.

We might take some comfort from the disciples' stumbling ineptitudes. If they could fall so short, surely our failings are put into context? There will always be times when we too fail to recognise the signs of God, quietly at work amongst us.

It's a natural reaction, perhaps, as we see the church becoming weaker and less influential, with so many of our congregations so visibly as frail, to wonder where it all might end and even to wonder if there's any way back for us. Are the church's days numbered? But the truths we can draw from this incredibly rich little tale are genuinely encouraging.

Above all, it invites us have faith and trust in God. Jesus may seem to be obliviously, uncaring, snoring at the back of the boat, but we must realise that when we dare to place out trust in him we're safe, even though the outcomes may not exactly be as we'd imagine – as his first friends were quick to discover.

If we put our faith in Jesus, even when we fail to understand his message completely (as we too most surely will), we'll open up a whole new world of possibilities. We need have nothing to fear unless we fall into the trap of thinking that the consequences of faith in God must always conform to our own narrow perspectives and prejudices.

The proper corrective to this is that when we look back over history, and maybe even over the stories of our own lives, we will see countless stories to encourage us about how powerfully transformative Jesus can be in the lives of those who have dared to put their faith in him.

All this leads me to want to re-affirm the image of the boat as an important and helpful symbol to sustain us alongside those of the fish and the cross. It's surely highly appropriate for us and our times as we're tossed around on a sea of apathy and uncertainty, which at times may seem almost as threatening to us those other forms of chaos and evil that have so often tossed and troubled Christians in the past.

And yet Jesus remains worthy of our trust. We may not understand what's happening, indeed we won't and can't understand it fully, but Jesus's words to us carry as much force as they did on that lake over two thousand years ago: Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?

What can we say? How do we respond? One pithily pertinent little prayer that we may do well to remember and dare to borrow, is placed by St Mark later in his Gospel on the lips of a distraught father: 'Lord I believe, help my unbelief!'