

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 20 June 2021
11.00am Rev John Swarbrick

Job 38: 1–11
Mark 4: 35–41

FOR MANY YEARS my parents owned a static caravan set in a small wooded park alongside about twenty others on the eastern shore of Bassenthwaite Lake in Cumbria. It was an idyllic spot, the site of many happy holidays and the source of many happy memories. It's a part of my home county to which I love to return, though a return hasn't been possible for some time.

Back in the late 1980s, a group of friends and I were staying there for a week, and one of those friends was an experienced yachtsman who was itching to take a sailing dinghy out for a spin. We three landlubbers thought that this would be a pleasant enough little jaunt, a bit like a missing chapter from *Swallows and Amazons*, and it all began well enough until the winds got up. I say 'winds' in the plural because they kept changing direction all the time. We learnt later that this is a characteristic of inland lakes surrounded by mountains—in this case with Skiddaw on one side and Sale Fell on the other. We tacked and yawed as one squall after another battered us; the boom swung back and forth over our heads; but our skipper managed to keep his crew afloat. Somewhat green around the gills, we finally made it ashore. This experiment was not repeated.

But it helped all of us student ministers to appreciate the meteorology of a storm on the Sea of Galilee—one of two such episodes recorded in Mark's Gospel.¹ Such was the significance of these accounts, one of the stilling of the storm and the other of

¹ Mark 6: 45–52

Jesus' walking on the water, that the early Church adopted a ship as a symbol and metaphor of its life: the Church tossed about on the sea of disbelief and worldliness, persecution and martyrdom, but finally reaching safe harbour with its cargo of human souls. In visual representations, the ship's mast often took the form of a cross—which it still does today in the logo of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. The ship even gave its name to an important part of the architecture of a church building. You are sitting in it this morning: it's called the nave, a word which comes from the Latin *navis*, meaning 'ship', and also gives us the English word 'navy'.

Back to the storm: there always seems to be one in the Bible somewhere. The Old Testament calls it 'chaos'. That is where the biblical story of God and humanity begins in the opening verses of Genesis:

. . . the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Genesis 1: 2

The great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth called it *Das Nichtige*—which sounds even scarier in Swiss German—a crushing, irresistible force of disorder as yet untamed and on the loose in our world. I want to suggest to you this morning that this is the recurring place of disciples, the place of the Church, the place of ministry, the place of preaching, the place where we all live.

The Bible is much more preoccupied with the threat of chaos than it is with sin and guilt. To some extent, we have worked out ways of handling sin and guilt, the language of forgiveness and the assurance of pardon. But the storm is not so easy. The storm produces a more elemental, fearful sense of helplessness because we cannot touch it anywhere or handle it or measure it or hold it. That is certainly true for Job. He, his three comforters and his strange guest Elihu have talked themselves to a standstill by the end of chapter 37. None of these people have been able to offer Job a convincing explanation

for his terrible and undeserved suffering, and then . . . then God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind:

'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?'

Job 38: 4a

The storm is bottomless in depth and beyond measure in force: call it the flood, call it Leviathan, call it chaos, call it what you will. All those new scientific theories about the 'goodness of chaos' do not address the deep fear about which the Bible speaks. Those fears are various:

- our stewardship of creation and our ill-judged interactions with the natural world, of which the current Covid pandemic is a sobering example; or
- the circumstances of our personal lives where we may rail against the unjustness of God or whatever it is that undermines our basic sense of trust in our own bodies, or in our personal relationships; or
- the increasingly reactionary and autocratic politics of our world and the threats to liberal democracy; or
- our response to the erosion of faith and the future of the ship of the Church in an increasingly secular western world.

To take the last of those examples: at the risk of sounding like Private Fraser in *Dad's Army*—'We're all doomed, I tell ye, doomed'—these are tough times for the mainstream churches. Numbers are falling, congregations are ageing, vocations to ordained ministry are declining. A few figures: there are now more retired/supernumerary ministers in the Methodist Church than those in the active work. I've recently joined that club. Between 2015 and 2020 the Church of England lost 25% of its stipendiary clergy through retirement. In both our traditions, they will not be replaced at the same level.

But a few depressing statistics do not tell the whole story. Independent and Pentecostal congregations are growing, at least for the moment. I have found the number of younger people in this

church a source of delight and encouragement. Alternatives to the institutional churches take a different shape: the Sunday Assembly, of which there are a number in London, offer predominantly younger people the opportunity to gather together, sing songs, reflect in silence and listen to an inspiring speaker—a bit like a church service, but without any ‘religious’ content at all; or the rediscovery of meditation; or witness the recent development of the practice of mindfulness. I find all this intriguing because it suggests that people are still conscious of or interested in some aspect of what we might call the ‘spiritual’ dimension of life and of their own lives.

But if many younger people have given up on the Church, we should be honest and look within ourselves for some of the answers: the resistance to change—or the grudging acceptance of change, provided that it doesn’t make any difference; the attitudes to women in positions of leadership in the Church; and the inclusion of LGBT people. Media exposure of these issues has done us no good at all. I have a colleague in my former Circuit who is the Methodist chaplain to City University and his role is, as they say, a tough gig.

Oh, I know many of the arguments: Scripture says this; tradition says that. Well, Scripture not only permits but condones slavery, and nowhere forbids it; but we changed our mind and our conscience on that—even if it took eighteen hundred years to get there. In addition, as I have witnessed charring meetings over many years, churches can become absorbed to the point of self-destruction about matters of piffling unimportance in the greater scheme of things; it’s an unhealthy symptom of our anxieties, as we become too preoccupied with our own internal wranglings to pay attention to one another or listen to God, present in our world.

In our Gospel reading from Mark, a storm blows up on the Sea of Galilee, as the winds ricochet off the surrounding Galilean hills. The disciples in the boat are terrified. And where is Jesus? Asleep on a cushion in the stern. Like God’s answering Job out of the whirlwind

with endless questions, Jesus does not seem overly preoccupied with his disciples and their terror. He eventually wakes up and rebukes the wind, and there is stillness:

'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'

Mark 4: 40

That leads the disciples to ask themselves some searching questions. Mark returns to the charge in chapter 6—same lake, another storm. But this time the disciples are alone in the boat, trying to manage the howling gale themselves. They look up, and there he is, walking over the heaving water. He's there, but not recognized. He's in a place and in a guise which are unfamiliar. It's like when we see someone out of their normal context and are surprised when we do not recognize them. I should have thought that they would have welcomed him; but he scares them. He scares them more than the storm, because in the storm Jesus appears in forms that are not immediately recognizable. He is not their good friend, not their nice uncle, not a familiar presence. He turns out in the storm beyond their imaginings. Even more than that, his being there in the midst of the storm with them does them no good. He changes nothing . . . until he speaks. Everything depends on his speaking. The being of Jesus won't do without the self-announcement of Jesus. He has to say something.

So, he says it: *'It is I'* (Mark 6: 50). He doesn't say his name; they know that. They hadn't thought to summon his name or to utter his name or to take the name of Jesus with them. No, when he said, *'It is I'*, the words would have triggered a recollection of those texts of God's self-disclosure revealed to their forebears in the faith in the ancient storm of the exile—the great storm which had threatened to destroy their identity and sense of belonging. (Have another look at Second Isaiah.) Jesus speaks those words of the self-disclosure of God who is present even in chaos, just as God had spoken to Job out of the whirlwind.

How do the disciples respond? In that moment, they look at him, as the Church is always ready to do; but they don't just look at him. They look at the storm still raging; they look quickly back and forth, back to him in faith, back to the storm in fear. It's Peter who takes the plunge, so to speak. Foolhardy, impetuous—or as Sir Humphrey used to say in *Yes, Minister* about a spectacularly foolish decision by Jim Hacker—'courageous, minister'. Peter can manage to walk on the water, as long as he focuses on Jesus and moves towards him. But he is afraid.

What is the most frequent command/imperative in the New Testament? *'Do not be afraid'*. When Jesus says, *'Do not be afraid'* (Mark 6: 50), it is an astonishing invitation to faith and trust—rather like a parent soothing a frightened child who is waking from a nightmare: 'It's all right; I'm here now; do not be afraid'. Except that unlike a sleeping child, the nightmare—the storm—around us persists. But Mark brings that second storm to an end with these words:

At this they were utterly astounded, for they had not understood the incident of the loaves; their minds were closed.

Mark 6: 52

Now bear with me for a moment: the first stilling of the storm in Mark 4 is preceded by two parables about the kingdom of God. We heard them last Sunday: the parable of the seed growing secretly and the parable of the mustard seed. The second stilling of the storm and the account of Jesus' walking on the water in Mark 6 is preceded by the story of the feeding of the five thousand where Jesus speaks the four great verbs which translate into the action of the Holy Communion: he took, he blessed, he broke, he gave . . . he fed, and there was more than enough to go round, so that grace abounds even as the loaves abound.

Creation works! It's not all chaos. The Creator is here in abundance. *The world is charged with the grandeur of God.*² Despite all that we do to it, the world is charged with the grandeur of God! The disciples did not understand that the bread of life is thrown into the face of the storm of death, and the bread will win. The bread will win every time.

But they didn't get it. They didn't get it because they kept one eye on the storm and so lost the freedom of a greater truth. They didn't get it because he looked like a ghost in his unfamiliar costume as Creator. But mostly they didn't get it because their hearts were hardened. They thought that they were still children of Exodus, a free people of God, but there was so much of Egypt still in them, so much of Pharaoh in their midst with a hard heart, so much resistance, so great a capacity to exploit God's gifts, so little capacity to yield to God in new obedience . . . almost as if they preferred slavery to freedom.

Every time we gather round the Lord's Table, it is about the stilling of our fear of the storm—in the world, in our lives, and in the Church—as well as an experience of God's extravagant provision for the journey; it is also about God's invitation to us all to enter the kingdom where the seed grows secretly and as extravagantly as a mustard tree, and we share in what God is doing there and discover that it is not a duty but a delight.

This kingdom exists on no map, nor in any atlas, nor on a GPS app; it exists only in our hearts and minds and imaginations. We are invited into it to discover what God is already doing there and to share in it. It is not *our* work—that's an ancient heresy as well as a contemporary delusion—it's *God* at work in us as individuals and as a community of God's people. Which means that our churches are, in a phrase which the poet R. S. Thomas gave to one of his collections of poems³, little laboratories of the Spirit where we can test out all

² Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', line 1

³ R. S. Thomas, *Laboratories of the Spirit* (1975).

that it means to be human in the company of others. We can explore together our potential for growth and transformation as disciples of Jesus, the Word made flesh. We discover those resources that will enable us to proclaim and embody a faith where grace and the celebration of life, rather than dread and the fear of death, become the motivators of our life and action.

The Christian message is not intended to warn people how to be saved out of this wicked world; instead, it invites them to feel at home in it, to reverence it, and to practise the disciplines of sharing its good things with others, particularly with the poor of the earth. It calls us to a politics of justice—what the Hebrew prophets call ‘righteousness’—because one of the scandals of history is the way the powerful have colonized creation for themselves and their own interests and coerced the rest of us into a weary acquiescence that ‘there is no alternative’. They still do. To mark Refugee Sunday today, to say that we welcome the stranger, is one of many examples by which we allow our consciences to be challenged. In other words, there *is* an alternative: we can’t see it all and know it all, and Jesus was a bit short on the specifics, but I believe he trusts us well enough to get on with the job.

Here at Hinde Street, we are a little community of the kingdom, a little laboratory of the Spirit. Never forget that. That is what gives us the hope and the courage to believe that we and the world can be different. We can be transformed by a love that is stronger than death, a love that finds its most powerful expression in self-giving and generosity and sheer, unbridled gratitude. It is the greatest gift. All we have to do is reach out and receive/take it.

Holy Spirit,
mighty wind of God,
inhabit our darkness,
brood over our abyss
and speak to our chaos;
that we may breathe with your life,

share your creation
and discover our place in your kingdom;
in the power of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**