

Trinity 8 2014 St Marylebone 11 am

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Having heard of the murder of John the Baptistⁱ, Jesus had tried very to get away from it all.ⁱⁱ

First, he got into a boat and landed in what he thought would be a quiet and deserted place, but very quickly crowds of people worked out where he was and came from towns and villages to seek him out.

In his compassion, Jesus spent the day with them, cured their sick, and, as night was drawing on, fed them with the five barley loaves and two fish, which were brought to him to bless, and break and give, feeding five thousand men, besides all the women and children.ⁱⁱⁱ

And this is where our gospel reading this morning picks up the story.

‘Immediately,’^{iv} it begins, ‘immediately’ Jesus makes the disciples get into a boat, while he stays behind to dismiss the crowds.

At last, Jesus is left alone, climbs up a nearby hillside and tries to find the peace and solitude he had been

searching for earlier in the day, somewhere where he can pray and weep for John the Baptist.

But even this moment of respite is short lived, for very quickly, the boat taking the disciples home gets into serious trouble on the notoriously changeable waters of the Lake.

A sudden squall batters the boat and the disciples are terrified, fearing for their lives.

In their fear, Jesus comes to them, and tells them not to be afraid.

Ever-impetuous, Peter tries to walk towards Jesus, but afraid of the wind, he immediately starts to sink and Jesus has to help him back into the boat.

Now there are a thousand and one sermons to be preached on this particular gospel passage; it is full of pregnant imagery and layered with meaning, but today want us to reflect on just one aspect of the story.

Matthew's gospel has long been regarded as the most 'churchy' of all the gospels, and by that I mean that scholars have long seen in its careful structure an ordering of the stories of Jesus so that they could be

read in assembly whenever the earliest Christians gathered together for worship.

Whenever we hear the word 'house' or 'boat' we are to understand, as the earliest Christians understood, that what is being said is for the Church to hear: we, as they, are understand that 'house' and 'boat' are synonyms for 'church' – the gathered people of God.

So here then, is a story for the 'church', the men and women who are in the 'same boat' as the terrified disciples who have been cast out into a hostile sea after Jesus has withdrawn from them.

Here is a story of encouragement and hope.

Having been fed by Jesus through the bread he has taken, and blessed and broken and given to them, the church is to know that although they face the raging storms hostility and persecution Jesus is with them and that there is nothing than can swamp them or overpower them or upend them.

One writer has put it like this, [from this story] the infant persecuted Church *learned . . . that she was not forsaken, that the Lord watches over her, unseen (as Jesus had*

watched over his disciples from the land), unseen, and that he himself, no phantom but the Living One, master of winds and waves – will surely come quickly for their salvation, even though it be in the fourth watch of the night”^v, even if, as Matthew in his narrative points out very clearly, their struggling faith falls short.

In Central London, we sail majestically through the still waters of life, in the great ocean liner that is St Marylebone, the seas around us are, thank fully, calm, and there is very little danger of us being swamped by the waves.

But for our bothers and sisters in Gaza, in Aleppo or Damascus, for Christians fleeing from Quaraquosh and Mosul in the plains of Ninevah, or fleeing from villages in Nigeria or Sudan, the ‘boats’ in which they sail are already being swamped and overwhelmed by the tsunamis of radical and militant Islam, in the guise of Boko Haram and ISIS and Al Qaeda.

To us, the Christians of St Marylebone, this over familiar story might be comforting, possibly soothing, but its power is somewhat lost to us.

But to those in the process of being tossed and thrown out of their already leaky and fragile boats and pitched into the perilous seas all around them, the hope of this story might be all they have to cling on to as, day after day, they reach out their hands in terror trying to grope for the outstretched arm of Jesus to hold them and save them, and haul them back safely to the shore.

This morning's gospel is first and foremost now, what it was when it was first told, a story for the terrified, a story for all who feel that they are being swamped and overwhelmed and are in danger of drowning.

Jesus stretches out his loving arms and says to them 'Come!'; may we and our brothers and sisters in faith throughout the world, hear his call and know his nearness, the power and the strength of his steadying hand to save.

In times of betrayal, in bereavement, in sickness, in moments of utter despair, when faith is weak and we are too frightened to put one foot in front of the other, may we know that Jesus is with us, alongside us, that he comes walking towards us across the perilous waves with his arms outstretched, inviting us to take hold of

his nail-pierced hands, the hands that crushed
Leviathan and Rahab, the monsters of the deep, the
hands which brought order out of chaos, the hands
which stilled the wind and the waves.

Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 14.1 ff.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 14.13

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 14.21

^{iv} Matthew 14.22

^v *The Meaning in the Miracles*, Jeffrey John