

CHAPTER 2010 : SPIRITUALITY (1)
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The Storm on the Lake

“On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 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?” 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. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” 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?”” Mark 4: 35-41

And so Jesus leads the disciples to the other side of the lake. In fact since the very beginning of his ministry through his teaching and his way of being he had been moving them over to the other side – to a broader and deeper way of thinking, to broader horizons, to newer vistas. Up to this point in the Gospel of Mark Jesus had been spending some time preaching in parables and the whole purpose of that teaching was to somehow awaken in the disciples a clearer view of reality. Yes he had been teaching by opening new doors on reality, a teaching that should have empowered them to dare begin to trust the life of the Spirit within, it was a teaching that dared stir and break open old ways of doing, of seeing, of knowing. It was a teaching that was indeed drawing them to the other side; moving beyond themselves, beyond their egos – to seeing and hearing in new ways.

But no doubt the disciples were uncomfortable with all of that – are we really any different from them? And yet Jesus would make them even more uncomfortable as he takes them for a spin across the lake. I think we would all agree, if we take the gospel seriously, Jesus is a master at making us feel uncomfortable. Yes the disciples are more than dumbfounded by the message of Jesus and now he is about to teach them in a very different way. In effect he is still teaching them by parables but this time around it is by action rather than words.

Notice, that in this particular episode, we have Jesus alone with the disciples; it is as if the crowds are not ready for such deeper stuff. When he moves over to the other side of the lake Jesus is moving his disciples to a different level of consciousness, to a different world view. On the other side are the Gerasenes – non Jews and to get there you have to cross the lake which at that time was far easier said than done.

So they are on the water; let us be aware that land, terra, firma, is for most people, where one feels secure – to move away from the land is to be in some way insecure, it’s moving into the unknown, it is moving into mystery. The sea is indeed a mighty and complex force. Nothing so struck the imagination of ancient peoples as did the sea, stretching out before them without end; immense with no known limits. The sea was the

dwelling of capricious and tumultuous forces that could come to life at any given moment. Not too many people liked to venture out into the open sea and certainly not at night which Jesus does with his disciples. The calming of the storm miracle reflects a problem that the fishermen frequently encounter on the Sea of Galilee. The Sea lies 180 metres or more below sea level at the end of the long, deep gorge known as the Jordan River valley. The wind rushes down the valley, gaining speed along the way, by the time the wind reaches the Sea itself, it can be ferocious, with sudden gusts that cause the sea to go from calm to being filled with foaming waves in a matter of minutes. Such occurrences would make even the most seasoned sailors very fearful. As we know so well the sea is certainly a description of life and the boat is the symbol, of the small fragile community of would be disciples afraid of the unknown; afraid of just where the Lord might be leading them.

We all know that when it comes to the unknown we are afraid – to move out into deeper waters does not thrill us. To move into unknown territory takes a lot of strength and courage and many of us know from our own experience just what that demands of us. Yet, again and again, in the gospels we see how difficult it is to be a disciple, to think the way the Lord thinks, to broaden our horizons, to break out of the narrow confines of the way we think and act. In the gospel of Mark we are so often told that we have eyes but we cannot perceive; we have ears and yet we cannot hear.

Yet coming back to our gospel passage, here we have Jesus in the stern, his head on the cushion asleep. This is a marvellous piece of theatre. A little band of fragile disciples, the waves threaten to engulf them and their leader is quite simply asleep. In their consternation and distress they wake the Lord who rebukes and calms the sea. You cannot but be excited by the way Jesus is able to calm the sea and I am sure Jesus can wield such power but that is really not the point of the story. To understand more fully the point of the miracle which, on the surface is a nature miracle, we must somehow get on the inside of it to discover its meaning, just like for the parables. The trouble is that so often for us we stay with what we see on the outside, merely upon the surface. I have no trouble with the idea that Jesus could calm the sea but this is not really at all what this episode is all about. Maybe this episode is for those of us who know what it is like to be afraid, for those of us who at times get the feeling that we are sinking that we are going down and the swollen waves seem to be swamping this tiny boat of ours. Yes there may have been times when we thought we were losing it when we thought that we were about to be engulfed by life itself, when all we could do was scream, even at God.

When we think of the problems that beset us and our ministry in Africa, when we seem to be constantly at odds with the terrible tide of corruption we see around us; when we see the effects of war and violence and seem so helpless to do anything; when we worry about just how powerless we seem to be then maybe all we can do is scream at God who seems to be asleep and so very far from the misery and hell of so many millions of his people. If we have been there, if we have somehow how sunk into the depths and been buffeted by the winds of life we will understand this text.

Then Jesus said to them: *“Why are you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?”*

Jesus chastised the disciples for their lack of faith. As with the parables we must look at the opposites at work here in this miracle. Faith is the opposite of fear – it is not the opposite of doubt. Faith is not an intellectual game, it’s not cerebral. Yes the opposite of faith is fear, anxiety, angst – worrying about many things. Notice how the passage ends. They were filled with awe. They were in a state of astonishment and they said to one another *“who can this be that even the wind and the sea obey him?”* Notice that this is not a faith response on behalf of the apostles, yet somehow they are getting there; they are beginning to ask the right questions. This is the same question that Mark hopes his readers ask *“Who is this man Jesus – who leads us out into the waves, out into sea, leading us to a different kind of fragile insecure thinking – where is this going to lead us? Maybe, just maybe, this is the sort of question we might be asking ourselves during these next days. Things are not always so clear to us; there are situations and events that weigh us down and even at times our community living seems to create more inner turmoil rather than anything else. Where is the Lord leading us in all this and just what does he want of us?”*

Yet let us take another look at this gospel passage, for above all, despite the appearances the story serves to illustrate the identity and care of Jesus. Behind this miracle story we have the whole weight of Old Testament texts which speak of control of the sea as distinctive of God’s sovereign power and faithfulness. We can take two examples for the psalms.

“O LORD God of hosts, who is as mighty as you, O LORD? Your faithfulness surrounds you. You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them.” Psalm 89:8-9

“For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity; they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits’ end. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.” Psalm 107: 25-29

Yes our faith tells us that we are not alone on this missionary journey of ours for the Lord is indeed with us and he is able to quell the storms that threaten us. If we are fortunate the storms we have faced have made us stronger; made us realise that we cannot depend on our own strength. Maybe the storms we have faced have helped us to be in even greater solidarity with the people we strive to serve and in greater solidarity with our brothers with whom we share our community living and witnessing. Above all we know that we can indeed weather storms and we can come through them different, scared maybe, hurt and broken at times but somehow stronger than before.

Particularly striking in Mark’s telling of this story is the amazing contrast between this particular scene and a scene from chapter 14: 32-41 of the same gospel. The scene described in chapter 14 is Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane and, this time around, it is the disciples who are sleeping and it is Jesus who is agitated and fearful. Once again as

we see in this gospel the disciples are really not with it. In the first case, they were wide awake when they should have been sleeping, and in the second they were sleeping when they should have been wide awake. Once again this is typical gospel paradox. When indeed we know such moments of pain and suffering we need to hear those words of Jesus: *Quiet – be still – words that reflect quite simply well known words from the psalm: Be still and know that I am God.*

To reach such calm, to reach such trust requires that we learn something of the art of letting go; letting go of all sorts of attachments; things that hold us back, things we cling to at times all too tightly. Deep down yes we are afraid of leaving the safe havens of all that we hold dear to – our ways of doing, our ways of perceiving things. But then our God, the eternal God of surprises is constantly leading us out into the deep.

Over these next few weeks we may well want to cling to the securities we have known, and begin to know something of the fear of going out into the deep, of moving into unknown. Yet when we look at the person of Jesus we realise that he himself was radically free; he was not hindered in his freedom by any attachments at all, not even an attachment to his own life. There are some of us who may well be afraid, but I think we also realise then when we cling to our lives, when we cling to only our ways of doing, when we cling to only our ways of perceiving things then somehow something within us is not alive and we have become rigid and lifeless like some broken branch of a tree.

Jesus was alive and free - willing to give up even his life so that others might have life in abundance – just maybe there are things that we have to give up if we are to offer life to others, just maybe there are assumptions and prejudices we need to gently let go of in order together as a Society face the realities of the world around us. But none of that is possible if we are unable to place our trust in God and in him alone; and trusting does not mean clinging but rather surrendering our lives, our ministry, our society even - into his hands – after all they are his. No must not cling to God; we don't hold tightly as some frightened child – if that were the case God becomes nothing more than a crutch for all that is broken and wounded with us. As Albert Nolan so rightly says: *'clinging, even clinging to God is the work of a frightened ego.'* We can let go – we can surrender we can trust God, and slowly but surely let go of all that would impede us from being free; from becoming truly instruments of his peace and love to the people we serve.

If we are truly to be disciples; if we are to be missionaries and respond to the reality of the world around us then inevitably Jesus will challenge us to go to the other side. Inevitably, as a Society, Jesus will make us feel uncomfortable as he will lead us, step by step, through waters of life over which we seem to have no control at all; but passing through them we will indeed come to the other side. And you know when we are uncomfortable, when we are not at ease, when we know a certain anxiety and even fear then we will always have a choice to make. We can choose to cling to all that we hold dear to, we can choose to stay within the confines of our self made comfort zones, the havens of all that we see as security - in other words we shut down, we stagnate even though we feel we are still being disciples. But if we are lucky we may well hear those

voices that call us to move to the other side; those voices may well indeed come from the sick, the marginalised, those caught in the trap of misery, those innocent barely audible voices of the many millions caught up in the world of violence and hatred – at times we may well indeed feel uneasy with such voices because moving out into the deep will demand all our strength and so many times we may well feel as though we should back track to return to the tried and tested waters of all that we once knew.

But moving out into the unknown, travelling the road less travelled is a journey that we do not make alone – the Lord is with us – and he will lead us; we might not always realise just where he will lead us, we might still have some lingering doubts about what we are doing and whether we are truly up to the task but, you know, in some strange way when we get there the other side will eventually begin to feel like home and we may well wonder just why we were ever afraid in the first place. The other side, if we allow it, will show itself to be a place where so many unexpected gifts are given and received; the other side just might become the place of abundant blessings as we discover the great beauty and richness of that which we saw to be the unknown and shrouded in mystery. The other side is somehow nothing more than seeing as Jesus sees and hearing as he hears.