

Sermon for 20.02.22 – Luke 8 22.25 - Revd Carol Harley

You can't beat a good story!

The television companies know this; whether it's through drama, a film or a soap, stories feature in their schedules and maintain position in their ratings. I can still remember on Sunday evenings thousands of people, including my husband and myself, being glued to our TV screens to watch the serialisation of the Forsythe Saga. At the time the BBC were blamed for the decline in Sunday Evening Church attendance.

The Jews know this. Which parts of the Old Testament are memorable – and remembered? It's the stories – Elijah, David, Samson, Jonah and the rest. David Kossow is one of a long line of story tellers that goes all the way back.

Jesus knew this. The stories, we know them as parables, of the Good Samaritan, the Sower and the Prodigal Son are just some examples of his story telling expertise and technique.

The early Christians knew this. They used their tradition and met the need and the thirst for stories.

This morning we have heard the writer of Luke's Gospel telling the story of the storm on Lake Galilee. So, let's try to imagine that we are onlookers in the boat with Jesus and the disciples as they set out to sail across to the other side of the lake.

As they set out Jesus fell asleep at the stern of the boat. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a storm blew up, the wind hammering down on the lake, and the boat began to fill up with great green spouts of water threatening to swamp the boat. Realising they were in great danger, the disciples went to Jesus and woke him up, saying, Teacher, Teacher, don't you care that we are about to die! Then came the command of Jesus to the wind and the stormy waves – 'Be quiet! Be still!' and there was a great calm. And then the questions to the disciples, 'Why are you so frightened? Have you still no faith?'

Why this story?

Well it's been suggested that it's there for the benefit of the church. The early Christians were often hunted down and murdered for their faith. The church was shaken to its roots by opposition. Its existence was threatened. There was the real possibility of total extinction. It was a storm – in every sense of the word.

There must have been many Christians then, in the midst of that storm, who turned their faces to heaven and cried, 'Lord, don't you care that we are about to die?' and the answer is that he does know and that he does care.

That is the story of the church for close to 2000 years. Yes, there has been persecution and there have been many other storms too. Look for example at the stories of the church in our time that come from places as far apart as Nigeria or from China where many are hunted down and killed for their faith.

Hear again the truth that it is God's church; founded by him, loved by him. Within his purpose and within his care – eternally.

I am sure that the story of the storm was intended to strengthen and reassure the church of the early years.

I am equally sure that the story of the storm is intended to strengthen and reassure the church of today, whether we face the storm of persecution, of modern day dictators, the sneers and ridicule, or indifference. Jesus says, 'Be quiet. Be still.'

Why this story?

I believe it's there for the benefit of individual Christians.

As the group of disciples travelled and responded to the requests from congregations to tell the stories of Jesus they must have looked around at the faces of the ones who had gathered together for worship and teaching. What did they see? Surely they saw, amidst all the sparkle of anticipation, brows furrowed and faces lined by the sheer struggle of Christian discipleship living in such a hostile society. They must have known something of the heartache of many members of those early Christian communities. Some were facing the storms of suffering; some the storms of bereavement; some the storms of anxiety; some the storms of doubt.

The disciples knew because they shared all of that and much more. Read the gospel story and learn again and again how that group, privileged to be in the very presence of Jesus, were at times at odds with each other or with his teaching or even with him. Even Peter hears Jesus say to him, 'Get away from me Satan'. Storms of one sort or another were part of their real-life experience.

This is still true. How many people in this or any other congregation know the reality of storms How many of us know the reality, in the middle of it all, of turning our faces towards heaven and in deep heart-breaking words crying 'Lord don't you care that we are about to die'?

I am sure that the story of the stilling of the storm was included in order to strengthen and reassure individual Christians. That's us too. Listen again to the promise of Jesus, who himself faced the storms of betrayal and denial and death in unspeakable pain. 'Do not be worried and upset. My peace I give to you. I will be with you always, to the end of the age.'

No promise here of tranquil waters or of quiet gently flowing streams. But in the full flow of the life of discipleship and in the storms, Jesus says 'Peace', and 'Be quiet. Be still.'

In the name of the Father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen