

## SEXAGESIMA – 2 before Lent 2018 (Year C)

It had never struck me before that the Creation account we heard (the second, and probably older of the two) starts with dryness. In the first, seven-day account, water is dark and menacing – and there from the moment of creation where, ‘the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep.’ In the reading today, no life occurs until a spring rises and covers the earth. This dryness ties in with the creation of the man (adam) from the dust of the earth – I have always found something almost heartbreakingly wonderful in that phrase- ‘then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.’ That very sense of all sentient life receiving life from God’s own creative act and life is very powerful.

The quality of closeness between God and man has an almost playful quality as animals are brought to the man to name. Yet this is not enough, because God realises that for all this, the man is lonely, and so Eve is created. Although we might nowadays have the shouting down of this account by certain areas of society because of its perceived patriarchal nature, in fact there is a wonderful unity between man and woman - ‘Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.’ Humanity, created from the dust of the Earth, share an intimacy with each other founded on Divine Love.

At the other end of the Bible, the passage from Revelation conjures up the majesty and glory of the God of all creation, using imagery from Isaiah and Ezekiel. Here there is a sense that the personal intimacy we saw in Genesis is replaced by the otherness of God by the majesty of this heavenly vision. So between the opening and ending books of our scriptures, a gulf of perception could so easily be seen from that early intimacy of the divine encounter imagined in the Creation account to the stupendous nature of heavenly worship John offers.

Enter Jesus.

The account of the Calming of the Storm is also very vivid, and in the space of three verses, Luke conjures up a situation which we ourselves might imagine being a part of. The men, many of them used to working on the Sea of Galilee, are terrified at this sudden threat and rush to the sleeping Jesus. The Sea is seen very much in the usual Old Testament understanding as being a place of malevolence from which God is absent. This is related to and mirrors those myths of other cultures of the Middle East, and we can see it reflected time and time again in the Scriptures. In Psalm 18 the psalmist calls on God in distress, and God flies upon the cherubim to the rescue: *16 He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters. 17 He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me; for they were too mighty for me. 18 They confronted me in the day of my calamity; but the Lord was my support. 19 He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me.*

This is the imagery at play the Calming of the Storm, and I think that Luke also wants us to associate the account with the story of Jonah. Jonah (like Jesus) is asleep on the boat, but he is trying to escape the call of God. He is roused by the captain and brought up on deck, and as the sailors become more and more desperate and frightened, they cast lots and chuck Jonah overboard into the raging tempest. You will remember the mighty whale, fortuitously

provided by God, who swallows the hapless Jonah, who then lives and prays in its belly for three days and nights before he is spewed up on a beach near Nineveh to get on with the job God wants him to do, of calling the people to repentance. There is no escaping God's call!

As well as this resonance, Luke's readers at the time will have understood that the boat represents the Church – the Body of Christ. This is an imperfect vessel, because it is made up of ordinary people, that is, you and me. But we should never forget our connectedness with our brothers and sisters in Christ – we **are** the Church. No wonder that it seems sometimes that it will be overwhelmed when it relies on me to be part of its structure. Yet at its best, the Church is a sign of transformation and the fulness of life. With Jesus present, the boat will never be completely wrecked and sunk.

Ultimately though, we don't have to go far below the surface to realise that the calming of the storm is about Faith itself. In the face of blind terror from the disciples, Jesus says, 'Where is your faith?' With the abatement of the storm, their reaction is one of puzzlement. 'Who is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?' Even after that Caesarea moment a little later in the Gospel when they acknowledge him as the Messiah, the Anointed One, their understanding is incomplete. It will take the death, resurrection of Jesus, together with the Coming of the Holy Spirit to open their eyes fully to the reality of the fulness of life which he offers to those who follow him.

What does all this mean for us? Do we have to rely on miracles to confirm the essence of our faith? In fact, if we do this, we flatten out the richness of these three verses, and turn Jesus into a cardboard cut-out of a miracle worker. Rather, I think these verses call us to explore three things:

**First:** We are called to explore who Jesus is. What is the authority displayed in this account? We do this by exploring the richness of the Scriptures from beginning to end, looking at even those stories or parts of the Bible which might dismay us (or bore us!) in order to understand a progression of an understanding of God's boundless Love which finds its ultimate dwelling place in the face of Jesus Christ. Sunday by Sunday we say the words, 'True God and True man.' What does this mean? For me, it means that in Jesus, who reveals selfless love through Passion Death and Resurrection, I myself am drawn to Resurrection Life and find in Jesus all that I can know of God's love for me.

**Secondly:** that in life - represented by the churning, raging sea - Jesus is ever present. The sea is my family, community, stuff (in popular parlance). It matters not what I am going through: anxiety, depression, worry, joys, whatever - I am always accompanied by the one who gave himself for me in great love. Jesus does not give us the magic recipe to escape all storms. He does not promise that we will avoid all difficulties. What he **has** promised us, however, is the strength to surmount them if we ask him for it, because of his abiding presence through the inward dwelling of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we are never alone. There is that wonderful American 1930's hymn, 'I serve a risen Saviour.' The chorus might seem a bit corny, but serves the purpose: 'He lives, he lives. Christ Jesus lives in me. He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way. He lives, he lives, Salvation to impart. You ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart!'

That presence accompanies each of us through life, but **we** are the ones who allow the knowledge of this presence to work within our lives.

**The third lesson** we may take is the stillness which Jesus offers us. Call it what you like: mindfulness, meditation, contemplation – but allowing God to abide within us not just in prayer but silence. In this, our own stillness leads us to a deeper understanding of the great Love God so readily shares with each of us through Jesus Christ. This is true freedom and true life – it is the best voyage we can ever undertake.



Modern icon of the Calming of the Storm

**Genesis 2: 4b-9, 15-25.**

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God

made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

'This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;

this one shall be called Woman,

for out of Man this one was taken.'

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

#### **Revelation 4**

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.' At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald.

Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, 'Holy, holy, holy,

the Lord God the Almighty,

who was and is and is to come.'

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

'You are worthy, our Lord and God,

to receive glory and honour and power,

for you created all things,

and by your will they existed and were created.'

#### **Luke 8: 22-25**

One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side of the lake.' So they put out, and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A gale swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up, shouting, 'Master, Master, we are perishing!' And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. He said to them, 'Where is your faith?' They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?'