

What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

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As I'm sure you all realise, this week's Gospel fits perfectly into the theme of Epiphany. It's a great story; a story that reinforces in bold, dramatic, images the theme of revelation; the manifestation of divine power and divine glory and divine wisdom in the life and ministry of Christ, which has been our focus since we heard again, just three weeks ago, the story of the visit of the magi to the infant Christ. And of all the Epiphany stories that we've been hearing week by week, I think that this week's Gospel is perhaps the most dramatic.

It comes after what has been a very good day: Jesus has been teaching; telling lots of stories about seeds being sown and plants growing; stories that got embedded in the minds of the crowds who followed him; stories that snuck past their scepticism and suspicions before exploding all their assumptions about life and faith and hope; stories that spoke mysteriously about the kingdom of God; a kingdom which was not just something that would come one day, but had actually, somehow, come with and in him. And at the end of that day, and in spite of the fact that there were at least four fishermen in the boat who should have known better; who should have known what the lake was like; who should have known how storms could blow up without a moment's notice, they decide to get into a boat to cross the sea. At the end of the day. As night is about to fall. Which, of course, sets us up for all of the drama. Almost on cue, a terrible wind suddenly blows in. The waves begin to whip. Water sprays into the boat; and soon it seems likely that the little boat will be swamped. This is as real as it gets: terror and fear and the threat of sudden death. And the language, the images, have the feel of someone who was there in that terrifying moment; of someone who was sitting there that day in that water-filled boat.

A moment of terror and fear, that is, until they cry out to Jesus; who somehow has remained asleep in all of this chaos and commotion. Who, when he wakes up, yells back to the howling winds and waves and commands them to be still. The Word which had been spoken at the ordering of Creation, the Word which became flesh and dwelt among us, speaks a word in the midst of the howling winds and waves and chaos and confusion, and, suddenly, calm falls; and order is restored. The Word that spoke Creation into existence now speaks it into submission.

But, as I'm sure we all realise, this isn't just a story about boats. It's not even a story about the weather, as much as we love to complain about that. This is a story about life. It's a story about faith and fear. And about the storms that sometimes come to us. And about where hope can be found. We may have never crossed the Sea of Galilee, but we've all been in that boat, at one time or another. As we all know, sometimes life is hard. Sometimes the winds are just too strong. Sometimes the waves are just too high. Sometimes our little boat is taking on water and threatening to sink. Sometimes we feel like "a fragile skiff tossing without a pilot in a stormy sea".¹

I think that each one of us could tell a storm story. Some of our stories will begin with a phone call; or a doctor's visit; or some other terrifying news that we did not want to

¹ I was alone in a desert waste, or rather, my soul was like a fragile skiff tossing without a pilot in a stormy sea. I knew that Jesus was there, asleep in my little boat, but the night was too black for me to see him. All was darkness. Not even a flash of lightning pierced the clouds. There's nothing reassuring about lightning, but, at least if the storm had burst, I should have been able to glimpse Jesus. But it was night, the dark night of the soul."

St. Therese of Lisieux, *The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux: The Story of a Soul*, John Beevers (trans.) (Image, 1957) p. 70.

hear. And some of those stories will start with the choices we've made; with our mistakes; with our sins. And yet even other stories will tell about the difficulty of relationships; of hopes and plans that fell apart, or the struggle to understand each other with clarity and respect. And still other storms arise out of nowhere and take us by surprise. Storms happen. Storms of loss and sorrow. Storms of suffering and confusion. Storms of failure and loneliness. Storms of disappointment and regret. Storms of depression and uncertainty and doubt. Sometimes things don't go our way. Order gives way to chaos. We are sinking. The water is deep and it's dark and the shore is a distant horizon. And we pray and we pray and we pray; and we ask and we ask and we ask; and, yet, it seems as if God is asleep; that he's curled up on a pillow at the back of the boat. Fix it, we cry. Make it better! Make it stop! And maybe we forget that sleeping Jesus is in the same boat that they're in; blown about by the same winds; tossed about by the same waves.

There's a lot of metaphor going on in this week's Gospel; and perhaps there's one more metaphor that we've not yet realised. Maybe Jesus asleep at the back of the boat is a kind of metaphor as well. Maybe Jesus awaking from sleep to calm the winds and waves with a word speaks of Jesus rising from the sleep of death; Jesus rising from the tomb, speaking a word of Resurrection.² Which is, perhaps, where our thoughts need to go whenever we feel that the storms are just too great; when we feel that the ship is going down and we have no hope. Perhaps we need to remember that Jesus says to the winds and the waves the very same word that he speaks to the frightened, fearful, disciples in the darkness of the upper room: Peace! Peace, be still. My peace I give unto you. The darkness of Holy Saturday leads to the bright glory of Easter Day. The darkness of Christ's death leads to the bright glory of the Resurrection. And the truth is, the Resurrection does not begin in the tomb, but in that moment when Christ's soul begins to ascend from the very depths of hell. Even in that moment when Jesus appears to be hopelessly asleep, sealed in the tomb with a great stone to bar the way, he is actually actively proclaiming the victory of the cross, trampling down death with death; defeating for all time the power of Satan.

So perhaps we learn, as the Season of Epiphany draws to a close, that the greatest storms we will ever face are never the winds and the waves of a harsh threatening world. Perhaps the greatest waves we face are the waves of doubt and despair; the wave of hopeless despair that tells us that God doesn't really care.³ If Jesus sometimes appears to be asleep to us, it may just be that he's active in ways that we cannot see; working to heal hearts that are divided by bitterness and resentment; working to help that person we love who is coping with addiction; working to move those in power to places of compassion and mercy. If the help we most need is in the healing of a physical ailment or mental illness, then we certainly would not be able to see Jesus at work. But the power of God is stronger than any wave that beats against us. And the love of God is deeper than any water that threatens to drown us. And in every storm Christ's says to us now what he said to them then, "Peace! Be still!"

² What is happening? Today there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence, and stillness, a great silence because the King sleeps; the earth was in terror and was still, because God slept in the flesh and raised up those who were sleeping from the ages... I command you: Awake, sleeper, I have not made you to be held a prisoner in the underworld. Arise from the dead; I am the life of the dead. Arise, O man, work of my hands, arise, you who were fashioned in my image. Rise, let us go hence; for you in me and I in you, together we are one undivided person... I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side, for you, who slept in paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side healed the pain of your side; my sleep will release you from your sleep in Hades; my sword has checked the sword which was turned against you.

A reading from an ancient homily for Holy Saturday: https://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010414_omelia-sabato-santo_en.html

³ Mark 4:38 - Master, carest thou not that we perish?