



## Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

# Going to the Other Side

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### Mark 4:35-41

Mark's Gospel is well and truly moving apace when we reach Chapter 4. The sheer energy of the gospel throbs on every page.

The context we have as we read the closing verses of Chapter 4 is that Jesus is reported to have been engaged in an extensive period of teaching in parables. Indeed there are four that are presented to us:-

- The Parable of the Sower
- The Lamp on a Stand
- The Parable of the Growing Seed
- The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Following a busy day of teaching and ministry, at Jesus' suggestion he and his disciples head over to what clearly was a quieter side of the lake. So much of Jesus' ministry took place around Lake Galilee. Mark does not indicate on which side of the lake this teaching took place, but I think we can hazard a reasonable conclusion that it was near Capernaum on the north-west shore. This is reinforced, at the beginning of Chapter 5, by the fact that when they land they are in a particular area or region known as the Gerasenes.

Lake Galilee is often mistakenly known as the Sea of Galilee, but we use this term because of the name given by the early writers. It is an inland lake of considerable size which is actually two hundred metres below sea level. The hills on either side give it a unique character and are the source of many gospel stories for the contemporary visitor.

Having visited the Holy Land on many occasions – and I hope to return in the next two or three years – I am always pleased to be able to take people on Lake Galilee. Because of its geographical setting, its altitude and the sudden upsurge of winds, the incident before us is a very frequent and understandable occurrence. A cold west wind is often channelled through the valleys and gullies and the tranquil waters soon become disturbed. One writer concluded, "Violent storms are common and evening storms, coinciding with the fall of darkness, are particularly dangerous."

No doubt the disciples were anticipating a gentle crossing and all of them were ready for rest. Mark's Gospel always contains attention to detail. We are told, "There were also other boats with him." (v.36) This would indicate that no-one was expecting the squall that developed suddenly. We are told that the ferocity was such that "the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped." (v.37)

It is of interest that in Matthew's Gospel the storm is captured by the use of the word "seismos" (Matthew 8:24): It was like an earthquake. Now it's important to recognise that in this group of disciples were men who had plied their trade on Lake Galilee and so for them to



be fearful is quite surprising. Jesus is asleep in the stern of the boat, when the disciples are possessed with panic and reach out to awaken him.

They address Jesus with the words of our text:

“Teacher, don’t you care if we drown.” (Mark 5:38)

I want to explore this text from the perspective of Jesus being asleep in the boat, the disciples in panic, and the calm that ensued.

Before opening up each of those three aspects, I draw your attention to two important matters: First of all, this is a classic example of what we know as a ‘nature miracle’. Walter Wessel reminds us, “Miracles of this kind seem to present the greatest problem to our contemporary world.” He is right, but it’s important that we remind ourselves that the New Testament draws from this that Jesus Christ is not only Lord over the church, but also Lord of all creation.

We read in Paul’s marvellous Letter to the Colossians, “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:16 and 17)

However difficult it is to wrestle with the few nature miracles in the gospels, they are not inconsistent with the truth to which Colossians draws our attention.

The second matter is that there is a definite sense of the eye witness in the words of Mark. If there is a unique relationship between Mark and Peter, which most scholars affirm, then this would certainly make sense. What other reason would there be to remind us that other boats were on the lake?

In this incident we observe a refining of the relationship between Jesus and the disciples, when there is a sharp exchange. We are undoubtedly going to be sympathetic towards the disciples, but we must note that they address Jesus as “Teacher” and not as Lord. The whole incident reveals the frailty of their faith and perhaps their inability to trust Jesus Christ.

## **THE LORD SLEEPS – REVEALING THE COMPOSURE OF CHRIST**

This is the only reference in the gospels to Jesus being asleep. In fact other references are of disciples sleeping – with negative connotations attached to those instances.

The reference to Jesus sleeping in the boat is another indication of Mark’s delicate touch in his use of detail. We read, “Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion.” This would tell me that he deliberately went to sleep; it wasn’t a case of nodding off.

Throughout the whole gospel narrative there is evidence of Jesus exhibiting a wonderful sense of composure, despite the most challenging of circumstances; nowhere more so than on the cross and in the sufferings that attended the journey.

There are many expressions of Christianity which encourage and even make promises about a life of success for the Christian. Donald English pointed out that “They lead to frustration and despair; they actually point the disciple towards the wrong goal in the Christian pilgrimage. It is enough that Christ goes with us on our journey.”



- His care for us is not minimised because of a difficult journey
- Our discipleship is not greater or lesser because we encounter strong seas
- The composure of Jesus Christ is manifest in the most challenging of places

I am led to believe that if you were to fly into the eye of a hurricane you will experience a great calm, so peaceful that birds can be seen flying there. As you peer upward, you do not see clouds, but only blue sky.

Jesus found himself in the eye of the storm; surrounding him was the tempest, but his spirit was cradled in God's peace. The disciples might well have been pounded by the tempest of fear, but they had not yet learned to enter into the eye of the storm through faith in God. (v.40)

It is so important to understand the composure of Christ. Unfortunately storms that rage within us cannot be cured by ourselves. In order to still the inward raging, we need the power of God's love as we encounter it in Jesus Christ.

What the disciples were learning on this momentous crossing of the Sea of Galilee was that the greatest danger lay not outside the boat, but inside themselves.

Of all the accounts in John Wesley's diary, the record of his first trip to the New World is worth studying. During the journey, a frighteningly fierce storm broke out and the ship was pitching and tossing like a child's bath toy.

It was while John and his compatriots were clinging for life on their bunks that they became aware of a community of Moravians, who were travelling to their new homeland. Wesley's observed that these Moravians were apparently unperturbed by the howling winds and crashing waves. To John Wesley, this was a sign of the kind of waterproof faith that he was to discover later in his ministry.

As he built a relationship with the Moravian community, he asked what made them so peaceful in the face of the storm. The only answer was one of heart-warming faith which would eventually transform his life and give shape to the Methodist Movement. This community had to face many storms, but the composure of Christ, as expressed in the Wesley message of Christian Holiness, had so much to offer to the world then and now.

## **THE DISCIPLES PANIC – THE LACK OF TRUST AMONG THE BAND OF DISCIPLES**

As we have already reminded ourselves, storms on Galilee arise unexpectedly. That fact has much to say to us, as well as to the first disciples.

Sometimes the storms of life can appear suddenly and, as such, threaten our very being. This is the kind of experience the disciples faced and they cried out for the Lord's intervention. The juxtaposition of Jesus sleeping in the boat and the disciples' pandemonium is striking!

Mark helps us to see the humanity of Jesus in his tiredness, just as we meet it elsewhere in the gospels in his hunger, thirst and pain.



We must focus our minds upon the fact that these were experienced fishermen. It must have been an extremely severe storm for these men to be caught up in panic.

Here at Wesley Mission, some of our most significant services involve helping people in crisis situations. Over recent years we have developed many programs that focus upon 'early intervention'. In the boat on the stormy lake, it was a case of crisis intervention.

- The disciples found themselves in the midst of an unexpected crisis.
- The disciples cried out for help, but their cry indicates lack of faith in Jesus' concern for them
- When we face crises in our lives, there is no shame in seeking help. Indeed this is one of the major challenges for people in need of such assistance.

This particular point has much to say to us – for we may find ourselves in situations where we wonder whether God is truly beside us in the storms we have to face.

As individuals and in our relationships with others, storms may blow us about, causing us to lose direction and even paralysing us with fear.

### **THE CALM THAT SETTLES EVERYTHING – THE AMAZEMENT THAT PEACE BRINGS**

The disciples are awestruck. The fear of the storm is now replaced with a new sense of fear, in a positive sense, about the One who shares the boat with them.

It is little wonder that they asked, "Who is this?" They have seen Jesus bringing healing into the lives of lepers and paralysed individuals. They have seen the power of his forgiveness and the way he is able to reach out to those who were ignored and rejected. They have seen his willingness to challenge the laws that too easily made men and women prisoners – and he is seen as the Lord of the Sabbath.

Now, they recognise that Jesus is able to rebuke the wind and speak calm to the waves. The question of Jesus to the disciples is full of meaning: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (v.40) and consequently they become terrified.

Jesus wanted his disciples to trust him, even when he was asleep – or perhaps more significantly, even at the heart of the storm.

- Following the ways of God is certainly not to be perceived as a storm-free journey
- How do you and I respond when these things appear unexpectedly?
- Have there been times when you have considered Jesus to be asleep when you most needed him?

It should be noted that the following incident in the Gospel of Mark is the story of the demoniac. On the lake, Jesus has brought calm to a howling, raging tempest; then Jesus brings a similar calm to one whose storm is obviously within.

In his Pulitzer prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker says that many of the fears we grapple with – fear of rejection, abandonment, failure, separation and loss – are but manifestations of the ultimate fear, and that is the fear of death. Perhaps he is right. We must ask how we can overcome fear – and it certainly seems to me that the only authentic gospel answer is linked to the life of faith.



Recently, when preparing a piece of work on the Psalms, my mind was focused on the fact that many psalms centred on the theme of trust and the implications of what this means in life.

As the disciples would learn what it is to trust in Jesus Christ, so their capacity to enlarge their understanding of the love of God becomes real. In the calm that Jesus brings upon this lake, his authority and power is also evident. Only as they trust in the Lord of the wind and waves will they capture the fullest understanding of just who Jesus Christ is.

When studying the gospel, it is always important to ask what impact these words would have had upon those who first heard them in the life of the early Christian community.

It is not difficult for us to imagine the impact that this story would have upon the persecuted Roman church. They had no doubt that they were living through storms which were not of their own making and they were certainly fearful.

As this story was repeated in their groups and in their worship, they would be reassured that the Son of God was with them, even amidst the storms of opposition.

Perhaps the early church was feeling that the boat of their community was about to sink. The style of the passage is rich and almost poetic and would be a positive contribution in the early church.

In a very helpful commentary, Sherman Johnson reminds us that it is only here that “Mark connects cowardice and lack of faith.” The question, ‘Who is this?’ will continue to be asked throughout the gospel. (6:49-52, 8:17-21, 9:32, 15:37-42)

The story is told of old Bishop Warren Chandler, after whom a school of theology at Emory University in North America is named. As he lay on his deathbed, a friend enquired whether or not he was afraid. “Please tell me frankly,” he said, “do you fear crossing over the river of death?”

“Why?” replied Chandler, “I belong to a Father who owns the land on both sides of the river.”

At this point in the ministry of Jesus, these disciples are learning a very important lesson of faith, which will undoubtedly feed into their confidence and hope for the mission that will lie well beyond the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We too need to grasp an understanding of the peace that God brings amidst all of life’s storms.