

Giving hope to all

This morning's gospel reading – Luke's account of Jesus calming the storm – turned out to be a rather more topical passage than we might have anticipated. I would imagine that the length and breadth of the country, preachers today are offering some comment about Dudley and Eunice as a way into thinking about this reading. With the dramatic television pictures from Friday fresh in our minds, and our recent experiences of lying in bed at night listening to fierce wind, the promise that Jesus is there in the midst of the tempest is reassuring.

But what I want us to focus on as we look at this short reading this morning are the two questions we meet in it. Jesus and the disciples are in the boat crossing the sea of Galilee, and a storm comes sweeping down the lake, whipping up the waters and tossing the boat around so that it begins to fill with water. The disciples, experienced fishermen who know their boats and know the water, realise the danger as the boat starts to fill with water. Luke tells us that "they were in danger". Jesus, meanwhile, sleeps on. The disciples wake him, warning him, "we are perishing!". Jesus woke up, rebukes the wind and the raging waves and they cease. Calm falls on the lake.

Jesus who stills the storm is the Son of God, through whom all things were made, who shares the power of the Creator and assigns to the sea its limits. The Saviour who stops the disciples perishing in the stormy water saves us by going through the deep waters of death, and raising us to new life in him.

Calm falls on the lake, and he asks his friends "Where is your faith?". Having faith doesn't mean that bad things don't happen, that we never face danger or sorrow or struggle; but the promise of the Gospel is that these do not have the last word, that they – and we – can be transformed by the hope that is held out to us in Christ's resurrection. The question "where is your faith?" leads us into "where do you place your hope?"

Calm falls on the lake. After the panic and peril of the storm, the disciples "afraid and amazed" ask one another "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water and they obey him?" The experience of being saved from the storm leads them to a realisation that they are in the presence of the power of God, the creative source of all life, therefore the ground of all hope.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have been reflecting on what it means to gather in love, in God's presence as his people, to gather for worship and for fellowship; then on what it means to grow in faith – to grow spiritually and numerically. As we grow spiritually we keep meeting the question "Where is your faith?" and keep asking "Who then is this?". We seek to deepen in our understanding of who God is, and what it means to follow Christ. To grow numerically, we need to be thinking about how we invite other people to join us on the journey of faith, how we help others to explore with us who God is, and what it means to follow Christ. In all of this, we need to be thinking about our habits and cultures of invitation and welcome.

And so today, we're thinking about what it might mean to be "Giving hope to all." And I want to suggest that there are two questions we might explore as we unpack that phrase.

Firstly, what are we talking about when we talk about giving? Are we talking about something we think we have, something that's ours, that we can choose to share with someone else? Do we get to say on what terms – what strings are attached to the gift? Do we only give what's left over? There's a poem that speaks powerfully to me by the theologian W. H. Vanstone, called "Love's endeavour, love's expense", that includes this stanza

Love that gives, gives evermore,
Gives with zeal, with eager hands,
Spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
Ventures all, its all expends.

Whether we're talking about giving time, or money, or talent, or space, or love, Christian giving surely must follow the pattern of Christ's self-giving – unconditionally, expecting nothing in return, and knowing that there is risk attached. There is risk in leaving our nets to follow Christ who calls us; there is risk in getting into the boat and setting out from the shore; there is risk in loving another person; there is risk in any change or any new venture. But Jesus rebukes the wind and the waters and there is calm. He asks us where is our faith.

But – and I want to be very clear about this – that isn't an invitation to us to be thoughtless, or foolhardy, to set off into the hills without a map or the proper equipment, to start building towers without first counting the cost; but it is an encouragement to trust that God who calls us is faithful, and will equip us for the work he calls us to do, and so we can be courageous in our generosity.

If the first question was what do we mean when we talk about giving, the second is what is the hope we think we're giving. We talk a lot about hope – everything from hoping the weather will be kind for an event, to hoping against hope for a situation to change or resolve. One of the most helpful ways I have found to think about hope is in an astonishing little book by Denise Inge, who was the wife of the Bishop of Worcester, and who died on Easter Day in 2014. The book is called "A Tour of Bones". The catalyst for writing it was that there is a medieval charnel house underneath the bishop's house in Worcester. As a way of getting her head round the fact of all these bones underneath her house, she went on a tour of some of the charnel houses of Europe and reflected on her experiences. She wrote the book knowing she was dying. At Sedlec in the Czech Republic she found herself thinking about resurrection, "about possibility and the quest to find a lasting hope" She wrote

"To be hope at all...hope must have one foot in the mud..."

Hope is not the same thing as optimism. Optimism says that things will get better. Hope says that the good we envisage is the good we work towards. Optimism is largely passive: it is about waiting for what is better to come to you. Hope is active: it goes out and does. It falls and fails sometimes, but it is tenacious and unafraid, and it survives long after optimism is dashed. Optimism daydreams; hope has confidence. It is awake. It will not let go of the notion that the good is real, and that we can find it." (p.92)

To put it another way, hope is living the change we want to see. If we hope for a world where the hungry are fed, we bring hope by feeding the hungry; if we hope for a world where God's good creation is safeguarded and stewarded well, we make the changes – radical changes – in our own lives that can make a difference to that; if we hope for the church to grow, we pray for grace to live the sort of lives that spill over with the love of God and the generosity of Christ's welcome, that say "Come and see."

Christian hope is not the same as pie-in-the-sky optimism that says "everything will be fine". Nor is it a thing we possess, that is ours to choose to hand out in neat little parcels, on our terms, when we feel like it. It is the vision of the world transformed in the power of the resurrection that gives meaning and shape and colour to everything

that we are and do. Christ calls us to gather in love as God's people; he calls us to grow in faith; and he calls us to share the hope that is in us – in how we worship, in how we live, and in how we serve.