

Mark 4.35-41

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” **36** And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. **37** A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. **38** But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” **39** And waking up, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Be silent! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. **40** He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” **41** And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

=====

When I was very young I’m pretty sure my parents told me things like: power points are dangerous, don’t stick things into them; pots cooking on the stove are hot and could burn you; and how to safely cross a road. My parents were giving me healthy fears, fears necessary for living in a world of potential dangers.

As I grew older though, I met lots of other things that make a person fearful. Fear says to us, something bad might happen, and we must try to control or prevent it. Fears can also spur us on to do creative things – fear of cancer leads us to spend millions on research for a cure; fear of accidents causes us to spend millions on safety measures. Fear of the effects of climate change should make us reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. But that situation is not yet fearful enough to get us to change our ways.

There are many other fears that are not so helpful, which we struggle to deal with.

A child may be frightened of the dark – at night she lies fearful in her bed, because there is a monster under it and a ghost in her wardrobe. Common sense says, we should just open the wardrobe for her, tell her to look under the bed, and see that nothing is there. And the light goes out, and the door closes, and her fears return. Her bed has become her prison. Maybe we could give her different information, that angels surround her bed, and that God is greater than any evil spirits.

Or consider the teenager, who fears the streets. He hides in the prison of his house, desperately trying to avoid a world that for him is filled with gangs and bullies. Maybe we could tell him about another kingdom, in which he is free to become himself, where there is a plan only for his good, not for his destruction.

Or what about the young adult, who fears some crippling illness, who lives in the prison of her anxiety, trying to identify the symptoms of physical disease. Do we just tell her not to worry, not to be so silly? Or could we offer her assurances about deeper meanings that can never be taken away, no matter what the future holds?

Or consider the factory worker whose family depends on him to pay the bills. He works imprisoned by the company, desperately trying to identify rumours about closure and where he fits in, or maybe laid off and out onto the dole. Do we tell him not to worry, not to be so pessimistic? Or do we acknowledge his real pain, and offer a faith that says nothing, not even being made redundant, can separate us from the love of God?

Lastly, the frail pensioner, who fears the hour of death. She survives imprisoned within the body she dreads to leave, desperately trying to face the certainty of mortality and the uncertainty of immortality. Black-clothed undertakers and long-faced vicars dwell in her imagination. Would we dare to tell her not to be so silly, to stop worrying? Or would we have the courage to tell her of Jesus who died for her, and who rose from the dead, to give her eternal life?

All of these are real fears that many people face. We are not much use to anyone while we are imprisoned in our fears. Life is not worth living when it is dominated by fear. Fear is a prison in which we shut ourselves when we feel threatened.

The miracle of Jesus calming the storm on the lake portrays human weakness and fear in all its ugliness, in this case fear of imminent death by drowning.

The first thing Jesus said after ordering the storm to stop was: 'Why are you so afraid?' If I was there, I think I would have grabbed his sleeve and shouted at him, 'Because we're human, for God's sake!' It is a part of our condition and our conditioning to have fears of all kinds.

In contrast to the disciples' fear, Jesus was not afraid - he was sleeping through the storm in the back of the boat. How could he do that? Did he know what was going to happen and how he would calm the storm? Yes, if we believe in a magical Jesus.

A better answer is that he was unafraid because of his own faith, faith in God his Father. He had what the disciples lacked. In fact he had what all humans lack. He accomplished a life of complete faith and trust in God, because we can't in our own strength. By living that one life of perfect offering and trust, he opened the way for us to navigate the storms of life.

There can be comfort in knowing our weaknesses. We are human; danger and fear comes with the territory of being human. Our faith will only be complete when we see God face to face.

In the meantime God has given us the Holy Spirit, another comforter. He, or she, is with us, in good times and bad. The Spirit assures us we have a future. So we can let go of whatever it is we're afraid to lose. If the essence of fear is trying to control or prevent something, the essence of faith is letting it go. In receiving God's mercy, and in appreciating that all is gift, we open ourselves to new freedom and possibilities.

What happened next for the disciples? Was life all beautiful and smooth sailing for them? No. Jesus was taking them with him into more of the challenges belonging to our human condition, where he would show them again and again his authority over all evil.

Leaving the crowd behind and following Jesus does not guarantee us, as individuals or as a church, a storm-free life. Like the disciples, we may often find ourselves crying out to God in the back of our boat, "Wake up! Do you not care?" Even when we make it through the storms, following Jesus may well take us straight into encounters with the worst pain and suffering of the world, the places where Jesus' touch is most needed, and where he needs us to act.

There is a place in Mark's gospel where Jesus teaches his disciples about faith that can move a mountain. In most bible translations he tells them to have faith in God. But the original Greek actually says, 'have the faith of God.' What is the faith of God? It is God's daring in love to create us, even though knowing we might reject him. Having the faith of God is our daring to love him in return, and our neighbour, and the whole of creation.

Was Jesus ever afraid? No, again not if we have a magical Jesus. Yes, if we think on his prayers in the garden of Gethsemane. There he said to his disciples that his soul was deeply grieved, even to death. Which sounds like extreme fear. To be a saviour he had to know what real human fear is like.

The reason God may seem to be asleep or silent in our situations is because he does not share our panic: he is God. The reason we panic is because we don't know how our life will turn out, and because we don't have faith that the end will be good. God knows our final end, hoping we turn to him again in faith. Sometimes it takes a storm to get our attention so that we lean on God and not our own resources.

Someone has counted the number of times that the expressions 'do not be afraid' or 'do not fear' or 'fear not' appear in the bible: it is 83 times. The expression is often accompanied by the words: 'for I am with you.'

In our weekly worship we have a confession of sin. Maybe we should have a weekly confession of fears. We could answer Jesus' question to his disciples, "Why are you afraid?" And allow him to speak his love to us, setting us free from our prisons of fear.

For let us not forget: in the end, after all, Jesus calmed the storm.