

Not long ago I was in a gift shop in Appledore and noticed a facsimile map of the North Devon coast marked with the names of all the shipwrecks which are recorded as having taken place in this area. Most of the shipwrecks marked dated from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fortunately because of advances in technology and ship design such occurrences are rare in our century. Yet we know that it is unwise for anyone to go out to sea without the proper navigational and safety equipment, and local knowledge about currents and weather etc.

For the ancients the sea was a place of danger; in a pre-scientific age, the power of the elements was constantly visible to those who relied on the sea for their livelihood. Whereas we live in an age where we believe that science and technology will conquer all before it, our Biblical readings come from an age where it was literally believed that only God had the power to control nature. A narrative of natural forces and of miraculous intervention was the norm, rather than the story of science. Thus the account of God parting the seas to enable the Israelites to escape the evil of the Egyptians.

In the Bible the sea was more than simply a natural phenomenon. It is metaphorically a place of primordial chaos, over which at the beginning of creation God imposes order. As we heard from the Book of Job today, “Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? – when I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors ....” The sea for the Hebrews was the place where the monster Leviathan resided, a place of threat and of potential chaos. It was also a place associated with evil. God’s control over the elements emphasizes the immense and all pervading power of God over all things.

In Mark’s writing of his Gospel, Jesus is a person who has amazing powers, powers which parallel those of God. Read today’s set Psalm, Psalm 107, and we will find the same story as our Gospel reading, not told as a historical event, but in the form of poem relating the power of God to calm a storm. The sailors are described as “reeled and staggered like a drunkard”, and being at “their wits end”. They cry out to the Lord in their trouble, and God made the storm be still and the waves of the sea calm. “Then they were glad because they were at rest” In our Miracle account the disciples are panicking whilst Jesus sleeps, but when he awakes, like God, he brings order to the chaos. Jesus reveals to the disciples that he has powers which parallel that of God; thus the amazed response of those with Jesus on the boat ‘Who is this man that even the wind and the sea obey him?’ From where do his powers come from?

Our readings today present us with a dilemma. There are many who will read the account of Jesus stilling the waves as literally true; but to the scientific mind, nature miracles are not possible. We cannot

historically get back to the actual events which lay behind these miracle stories. But if we put aside our questions about this “event” and rather enter the narrative with our imagination perhaps we will find some inner truth for ourselves. *In what sense does Jesus calm our storms, bring order to our chaos?*

At the beginning of our Gospel account the disciples set out on this sea. It is calm when they set out, but it does not remain so. Life brings for all of us its challenges and this may bring us to dark places, places of self-doubt and as people of faith, an experience of the absence of God’s protection.

Job, for example, a man of faith, found himself in a dangerous place; beset with disease, his possessions gone, and derided by his friends. He dares to demand of God how could he allow a blameless man like himself to suffer so much. Job doubts God’s intentions and indeed whether he really cares. After a long time of pleading, God responds to Job at last, but not in the way he expected. He doesn’t answer his question, but rather he challenges Job. Who is it who imposes order on the chaos at the creation of the world.? Who is it who ‘shut in the sea with doors’ who said ‘thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here your proud waves shall stop’ God challenges Job in spite of his doubts and questions, to continue to trust.

The Disciples too like Job face a crisis physical and spiritual. As sometimes naturally happens on Lake Galilee a storm suddenly arose. And the disciples are terrified. Parallel to Job, parallel to us sometimes at times of crisis in our lives, they can not control the powers which have been unleashed and they do not know what to do. They also act like Job as if they have been abandoned by their Master: ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’

Jesus’ response is to first still the storm. Like God he has the power to still the waves. The words he uses in Greek are the same words that Mark uses when he describes Jesus Exorcising evil spirits. Jesus stills the evil of the sea as he exorcises the demons within. Then he challenges the Disciples ‘Where is your trust? Reflecting back, the image of Jesus sleeping in the boat as it is tossed by the waves could be seen as an image of one who has total trust; there is no fear.

The account of this miracle challenges us; If we can trust in God, If we can trust in Jesus Christ, we will have access to a power which can bring a sense of calm and tranquility even when we are facing all the trials and tribulations of life. As we are very much aware we may feel a sense of despair or helplessness at the personal and communal crises which we all meet. But offering these situations up in prayer, placing our trust in God can bring a sense of perspective, a feeling of inner peace. We may know that the main part of a church building is known as the nave, derived from the Latin word for ship. The church building is a visible sign that a living faith provides stability in a restless world.

And one final thought about all of today's readings, to return to our opening theme, perhaps it is healthy to hear readings in which human limitations are very much in evidence. Though Science and Technology have their place in our world, so we are beginning to learn is respect for the amazing power and beauty of nature, and its propensity to continually surprise us. If we treat creation as Godly Order, which can easily revert to chaos if we lose that sense of respect, then the right balance between human ingenuity (created in the Image of God) and a care for the world in which we live and flourish may be found.