

Sunday 7th February 2010 2nd Sunday before Lent

Title: Be still

Readings: Genesis 2.4b-9, 15-end; Luke 8.22-25

The natural world and the forces of nature have loomed large over the past months and in recent weeks. Storms affecting this country in the Autumn, causing widespread flooding. The devastating earthquake in Haiti, which has left the world reeling. Our own simple acts of everyday life perhaps lift our awareness to those who have had *their* ordinary lives turned upside down – as we clean our teeth, prepare a meal, cross the street as traffic stops for us. Life turned upside down, not by man-made acts of violence or aggression but by the indiscriminate power of the natural world. A blog from 13th January just after the earthquake, from someone who works for a Christian NGO, continues to stay with me. At the bottom of the blog that described the devastation it read...

"I beg you to get on your knees – I truly mean ON YOUR KNEES – and pray for the people of this country." The media rolls on, Haiti begins to slip out of the news, it seems even now to be almost 'old news' to be bringing it up today. Floods, earthquakes, storms and droughts. It is the stuff our planet is made of. Not static but a vast creative energy of moving tectonic plates and weather systems; at times chaotic, indiscriminate and violent and beyond our control. We know that we do not have the power to say to any of this '*Be Still*'.

Contrast this with some of the images we have in our readings today. The peaceful order from Genesis, a garden planted by God, trees pleasant to look at and good for food, animals and birds created so that humankind should not be alone. People made from the earth and one another, living in mutual regard; woman, man, unselfconscious and at ease with each another and with God. The story of creation here emphasising a need for a home, freedom, food, harmonious relationships and a stable natural environment and above all, a closeness with God and a partnership in creation. A creator God who trusts humankind and in spite of the risks involved, chooses to allow a share in the creative process that shapes the future. An environment that seems to be inviting us to *know God* and his creation intimately.

In our passage from Luke, again God in relationship. The disciples sail on the lake, Jesus sleeps in the boat – a blissful picture, a very human Jesus exhausted, wiped out, at peace. God incarnate, laying down his power, risking, trusting and placing himself in his disciples' hands.

Both speak of intimacy, peace and trust, not chaos or devastation; the intimacy of the garden, a metaphor for the relationship with God that we long to come home to; the peace of the scene before the storm a picture of trust, of Jesus who lays down everything to be with us.

But that element of chaos and devastation are not far away and are woven into both. A storm rocks the peaceful boat trip, threatening their lives and revealing the chaos of deep doubt and lack of faith of the disciples. Whilst in the garden the tree of good and evil suggests temptation, which will bring separation, storms and eventually a rift between God and his people. Our relationship with God and with the natural order *is* shot through with doubt and chaos.

When they get into the boat, Jesus suggests to his disciples that they go across to the other side. Perhaps he knew that there would be a storm, but even so he sleeps, not unconcerned,

but trusting completely in the Father who he knows is with him in all that will come. It resonates with his command to Peter when he first gets into his boat 'Put out into the deep water...' We journey with Jesus from somewhere that is safe and known to somewhere other that is outside our experience. Each of us is in that boat. And each will have some experience of the deep water and storms that life leads us into.

Yesterday I heard people talking about God as a Higher Power in the context of the 12-step programme and the deep water and storms that addiction presents. What seemed to be at the heart of what was said was the humble admission that they were not alone in their struggle. Friendship and mutual support of one another was at the centre, the source of their strength and courage and love. The desire to help one another along, acknowledging weakness and fear, was a lifeline that sometimes literally meant hauling each other back into the boat when things were rough.

How do we deal with this rift and place of doubt, and experience of chaos? What are we doing when we literally get on our knees in the middle of storms and earthquakes, devastation and doubt, in our boat, and pray? We are seeking a way to come back into relationship with God and to know him – *even in this*.

As he stills the storm Jesus brings order out of chaos. He embodies the power that in the Old Testament only God could have. As psalm 107 describes '*He brought them out of their distress, he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.*' His action embodying the saving act of God in the Exodus as through Moses he liberated, preserved and protected his people. Jesus bridges that gap and finds the disciples huddled in the corner of the boat.

The disciples fear because they do not truly know who they have with them. Perhaps they recognise Jesus' vulnerability but they do not know that extent of the power and strength that he also holds and his capacity to bring peace and order and hope, and something endlessly new out of brokenness and suffering and the disorder of our natural world. Who is this? It is the *only one* who has the power in the midst of it all to say 'Be Still'.

We can be pig headed, think we can cope on our own, wonder too where on earth Jesus is.

When we let go and allow Him to find us in the storm, often through the care and friendship of others, and allow ourselves, in that place of doubt and chaos to be known by him... then we find stillness. The storm is still there – perhaps for quite some time ahead. But at the centre there is something that is steady and life giving. The calm and peace and authority of the one who literally sleeps in our boat. Who offers us an invitation to 'be still (in storm and flood and temptation and rocky patches, and loss of loved ones, and uncertainty and unemployment, and work and all the frustrations that threaten to drown and overwhelm us) and *know God*.

Jesus comes to us, completely vulnerable, alongside us, suffering with us and in doing that holds open the place for us to know God and find ourselves in relationship with him in the stillness of his love and authority.

We saw from Haiti, many images of people praying and turning to God. In the ruins of the Port-au-Prince cathedral, priests and congregation who had lost loved ones and their colleagues, amongst them their Archbishop, celebrated the Eucharist. In these simple acts they were allowing Christ to find them and meet them and know them, in the midst of the

rubble and confusion and loss, in *this* dreadful experience of his creation. Allowing God in Christ to be with them in the boat.

Like the disciples in Mark's version of this story we too want to shout out *Don't you care*, and then find it hard to recognise this Jesus who comes with power. Until we realise that, as we kneel and pray we find him, in his humanity *and* his strength, kneeling alongside us.

In the centre of the storm, Jesus offers himself into his Father's hands, sleeping in the boat. Completely trusting and loving his Father, offering us the gift of his humanity, the Son of God, tired and exhausted. Creator and created. Stiller of storm and flood and earthquake – in amongst the waves and rubble, here to bring new life.

We do not have the power to still storms and earthquakes but we can have faith to know that God meets us in them, suffers with us, and bridges the chaos and the doubt, holding in his life beside us a relationship that is endlessly creative, endlessly loving, endlessly abundant.

Be still my soul, the Lord is at your side.