

## St John's Catford

Trinity 9 2020

1 Kings 19:9-18

Psalm 85:8-13

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-23

I'd like to share a little advice with you, which Denis Thatcher is reputed to have given to his daughter Carol:

*'Better to keep your mouth shut and let people think you're an idiot, than to open it and remove all doubt.'*

A little harsh you might think, but Sir Denis wasn't known for mincing his words.

It's advice I try to follow, if not always successfully.

And the time when one has the least to say is when someone is going through great hardship.

What do you say to someone who has lost their job, has been in a horrible accident, or, worse, has lost a child, or a partner?

There are no words of comfort that will really work. All anyone can do for someone in such a situation is to be there with them; to be there for them.

How many people have been through hell over the last four months?

As I've said before, we've all experienced this period differently, but for most of those who have experienced something which in ordinary times

would have seemed a tragedy, such as serious illness or death in the family, it has been unimaginably awful.

Jews and Christians have for thousands have years turned to the psalms at such times, not to offer comfort, but to echo the depths of human pain.

*'My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'*

says Psalm 42.

*'Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your waterfalls; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.'*

It does end with hope, but our faith has always understood pain and suffering. Some Christians

seem to think that our faith should make us happy all the time, but I tell you, they are wrong.

It does give us hope, but that is something different. It does not take away our pain. The question is where and how to find God at times like that?

This is not an easy question, and it is one that humanity will continue to grapple with for as long as our species exists. But we start to find an answer in our gospel this morning.

As in Psalm 42, water, the sea, was for most of the time in which our biblical texts were emerging seen as a symbol of chaos. Chaos to which God brings order and creation. Think of the Spirit of God moving over the waters in Genesis, at the beginning of time.

And here the disciples find themselves on the Sea of Galilee, alone, their boat being battered by the waves. It's between about 3 and 6 a.m., so they must have been struggling on their own for hours before Jesus comes to them. All seems dark and hopeless.

How many of us have felt like that over the last few months, even if by now we might just be feeling weary, rather than terrified?

They are so scared that even when they see Jesus they cry out.

And rather than simply stilling the storm, in Matthew's gospel we get this profoundly real exchange between Jesus and St Peter.

Peter, the foremost of the apostles, is quite bold:

*'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.'*

*'Come!'* Jesus answers.

But just as he starts, his fear returns, and he begins to sink.

*'Lord, save me!'* he cries.

How true to life is that? After the earlier terror, Peter has a moment of confidence, only for it all to dissolve when he notices the wind again.

Think of a day when you have felt confident, only for it to disappear the following day. I don't know about you, but recently, more than ever, if someone asks me how I am, I really find it hard to answer in general

terms, because it depends so much on how I happen to feel at that particular moment.

One day might be good, but the following one everything might be crowding in on me again.

And Peter, the first of the apostles, is not perfect. He is like us. He finds confidence in Jesus's presence, then it is gone again.

But when does he seem closest to God? Well, after the worst of it.

He reaches the climax of his terror and shouts out, *'Lord, save me!'*

And at that moment Jesus reaches out his hand. They get into the boat, and the wind ceases. Calm returns.

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In our first reading we also have great tumult, followed by stillness. Rather than the terrifying, chaotic storm though, this time round the *'great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces...; the earthquake; and the fire'* are exactly the kind of things that the Jews thought they found God in.

These things represent the awe of God that we find in nature, and the fire is of course how Moses saw God, in the burning bush. But, instead of speaking to Elijah in those things, God speaks to him afterwards. He has lain hidden in the cave as the noise and the

heat pass by and as the earth moved, and now he hears something else, and comes out to listen.

He hears '*a sound of sheer silence.*' As with the calm that comes after Jesus has conveyed Peter back to the boat, now, after the drama, God speaks in the sound of silence. And Elijah wraps his cloak around his face in awe.

Again, there is a real truth about this. True silence, in the middle of nowhere, up a mountain, on your own, for example, has a presence about it. It is not an absence of noise, but a presence of its own.

And that is where God is here.

It is perhaps no accident that before He walks on water to the disciples, immediately after He has fed the 5,000, Jesus goes up a mountain to pray by himself, in silence.

And there is something about silence that is different from any other sound. It is always there. On one level, it is a very rare thing, certainly in Catford. Which is why people seek it out.

It is however always there, if hidden by all of the noise that normally masks it. If only everything else would stop, we would hear silence. It is pervasive, even if we do not often hear it for long.

But that is where God is in both our reading from 1 Kings and the story of Jesus walking on the water.

And in both of these stories, God, Jesus, comes immediately after great noise, great turbulence; in the gospel, great upset and fear.

When in those moments, we cannot hear the silence; we cannot even imagine the way out of our fear.

Yet - yet, while we cannot find the way out of our worry, out of our distress, out of our grief or depression or sickness, the silence - the calm - is there, behind the noise.

With Peter, we sink through being unable to hear the silence. We cry out '*Lord, save me!*' But in the midst of our anguish, when we reach the depths, when there is nothing else, that is often where there is

nothing left but the silence. And it is then that Jesus stretches out His hand to us.

It may not sound like a great answer to say that we have to wait until we reach the very depths. While Jesus is often found there, in the stillness, we do not have to wait for those moments.

If we search out the stillness now, He is there too. If we find our own mountain top in our daily life, whether here, or a spot at home, a time in the day when our children have gone to bed, while walking the dog perhaps, He is there too. He is there, reaching out His hand at all times. We just need to find ways of stilling the storm to hear Him, to let Him hold us.

Amen