

Intro

Do you feel at sea sometimes? I attended a training session for ministers and lay leaders this week all about the trauma of living in a pandemic. I noted some of the phrases that are characteristic of a trauma (PS Trauma is not the event it is how we body, mind and spirit respond to an event that causes trauma). The phrases were:

- *Loss of meaning* (the sudden change of circumstances puts everything that we know and love in a different perspective. What was meaningful before does not now, and we are still discovering those things that are meaningful in the changed circumstances)
- *Am I safe?* (People feel safe in the same routine of living. Now suddenly that has changed. Also the risk of getting ill is playing on our minds)
- *Do I belong?* (I used to be able to meet with people in church, at each others homes, at the golf course, slimming world, or whatever it is you were used to do. We were part of different communities. Now we found ourselves locked in, with no one to talk to, and some of us feeling utterly alone).
- *Our assumptions are shattered* (Everything that we took for granted in our daily living has to be re-assessed. Where is the toilet paper in the supermarket, why are people turning away from me, where can I go for a hug, or a handshake, or even: where is God in all this?)

Some of us have responded heroically, for me it was arranging zoom services, making sure everything was fine and people were accounted for. But for others there was nothing they could do and they would have been dropped immediately into a phase of disillusionment or despair. Now, we find ourselves slowly entering the rebuilding and restoration phases, hopefully to move on to a wiser living phase. But we may not experience this in a nice logical order and we can find ourselves feeling hopeful and optimistic, and then suddenly we are dropped back into state of despair.

Does that sound familiar? Because unlike a 'real' trauma like the explosion in Beirut where everyone is more or less equally affected, some of us have enjoyed being in a state of lock-down, and have experienced it as a bit of a holiday (flippantly). However we have experienced it, I think we need to give each other time and space, and listen to each other so that we can speak about how we have felt, even though it may be totally different from how others are feeling.

Part 1: Where is God in this?

But the phrase that exercises me as a Minister is "Where is God in this?". And that is maybe also what the disciples were asking themselves, as they find themselves as Disciples of Jesus, sailing in a boat on the lake of Galilee, being buffeted by the waves as they were sailing against the wind. It does not say there was a storm, or threat of loss of life, but the water was rough, the wind was strong and the waves were pounding the boat. But as quite a few of the Disciples were fishermen, they may well be used to that kind of sailing, but they would have preferred to be in the harbour, safe with Jesus.

And of course as Jews they never really trusted the sea, a symbol of the absence of God of a place of evil and chaos, always being at risk of drowning or even worse.

So here they are, following Jesus's command to sail to the other side of the lake. Their minds still full of what they saw Jesus do, just earlier in the day, as he multiplied the bread and the fishes and they had to hand it out to the crowd and clear up afterwards. And after that Jesus made them (commanded them) to go in the boat without them, while he went away to pray on a mountain side. While the disciples were ordered to negotiate with the 'deep', Jesus himself has gone the other way up a mountain, to be with God, and presumably much safer than they were.

Would their feelings be similar to our feelings in the pandemic?

- Are we safe? (We can still drown!)
- Do we belong (to Jesus)? (He has left us alone!)
- Loss of meaning (Why has he sent us this way, and why alone!)
- Shattering of assumptions (We were always there to follow him, and now have to do this on our own, and we do not see why we need to do this!)

Jesus does come

And then we read of another impossible miracle. It simply reads 'During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them walking on the lake' (14:25). A miracle of time, place and nature. Time, because he had been up the mountain, and had to be able to come down and presumably walking from the shoreline also against the wind. Place: Jesus walked on the water – subduing the water, showing that he has power over the water, the deep, evil forces of chaos. Nature: this is more for our time: Surely he should sink: does he have power over gravity so he does not sink or does he have power over fluidity of the water so it is firm for him to walk on? Both are not explainable in our current scientific understanding and worldview.

The disciples see this and at the end of the story they bow down to him and worship him and say 'Truly you are the Son of God' (v33).

Encouragement?

What encouragement can we take from this story? This story is finished, we know the ending: Jesus came, demonstrated his power as God and because Jesus is with the disciples again, they know they are safe, that they still belong to Jesus and they have regained their sense of meaning and can rebuild their assumptions. But some assumptions they had to change: Is Jesus a rabbi, a prophet, or miracle worker? No: the sign of the walking on the sea and subduing the forces of chaos under the sea makes them revisit one assumption: Truly Jesus is the Son of God!

But what about us – we are still in the midst of the raging sea. I believe that we can take this story as encouragement. Jesus is there, even if we cannot see him. We are safe, even if we do not notice him. We do belong, even if he seems far away. But maybe we do need to change our assumptions about him too: He is the Son of God, but also being safe, belonging to him and finding our meaning in him, we may need to revisit. We may

need change what we regard as safe – healthy in this world where we all will die, or safe in the next life with Jesus? Belonging may mean that once in a while we are sent out alone, like the disciples on the lake. And that even if we cannot see him, we need to believe that he is with us. As he is.

Part 2: Another invitation

You may have noted that I left out Peter from the story! We all know that when Peter saw Jesus that he was bold enough to ask him to come to him, and then bold enough to walk on the water, but then halfway through lost his confidence and began to sink. Jesus was then ready to lift him up out of the water. Often we hold up Peter as an example of not having enough faith... but maybe we should look at this differently. Here again is an invitation, and invitation to walk with Jesus but on the water!

Last week we saw Jesus inviting his disciples to join him in his Mission. We had the four points of 1. Actively waiting; 2 Provide what we have to Jesus; 3. Help distribute what Jesus has multiplied and 4. clearing up afterwards: practically and pastorally. Is this story another extension to what it means to be a disciple?

First of all, Jesus sends his disciples away, alone. This is not new, in Chapter 10 Jesus sends out the twelve disciples (in Luke there is also the sending of the 72, but this is not mentioned in Matthew), so they knew already what it meant to work on their own. But here they are on their own, without a specific brief, and in a potential dangerous situation, working hard to drive the boat. So when Jesus appeared there was a great relief. Here is the master, now everything is OK.

But then suddenly there is also another opportunity. They were fishermen, they knew how to sail a boat, and although it would have been dangerous it was their bread and butter. Now they see Jesus and Jesus does something they have not seen before!

And Peter is eager this time to take part in it. He has made the right assumption that if Jesus can do this, he can also invite Peter to do the same! 'Lord, if it is you, tell me to come out of the water'. But Peter was not quite sure if this was Jesus, even after his reassuring words: 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. (It is I – I Am – Yahweh – I am God)

And Jesus replies only 'Come'. Another invitation. An invitation again to follow Jesus, but now in a place where humans don't dare to tread. 'Come.' And you have to admire Peter: he came, he did walk on water with Jesus! He did what is humanly impossible, and with Jesus could do what is possible with God!

But suddenly he became aware of his circumstances. The initial joy of doing something impossible was invaded by daily life again. The wind and the waves; he became afraid; after which he began to sink.

'Lord, save me!' and Jesus did immediately. Jesus uses the words 'you of little faith, why did you doubt'. This is not the doubt of scepticism, but the doubt of indecision. He had to choose between Jesus and the reality of the world he found himself in, and he could not make a choice. The Greek word for this doubt is only used in Matt 28:17 when the disciples are in the presence of the risen Jesus. And they were not sceptical, they

were indecisive. They had to make a choice between God's worldview (walking on water, rising from death is normal) and the accepted world view (this is impossible).

Invitation to us

Peter's actions demonstrate another dimension of being a disciple of Jesus. Jesus will invite us into places where we normally do not go, or ask us to do things we normally do not do. He may send us out alone ahead of him. And then when he catches up with us he may provide us with an opportunity. We see Jesus doing something special, and then he invites us to ask like Peter: 'Tell me to come/do/say' and then Jesus says 'Come' or 'Do it'.

As a disciple are we willing to let Jesus command us? This is what Peter gives Jesus permission to: Tell me to come, order me to come. I give you permission to order me to do the impossible. For Peter this meant surrendering his life to the will of Jesus. For us this means throwing out all that we understand, believe and know and give Jesus authority over us. It is still our free will, but we freely surrender our will to Jesus.

And once we do, we walk on the water. As Jesus orders us to walk on the water. Or whatever it is that he orders us to do. Evangelise, Address injustices, healing and deliverance. Things we cannot do by ourselves, but now that Jesus orders us to this we can. Are we as disciples willing for Jesus to take such control over our lives?

In the end Peter could not fully do so, as we cannot fully do so either. But like Peter we can try. As Jesus is there with his hand reaching out, so that when we call: "Jesus, save us!" He is there.

Are we willing to surrender our will to Jesus and take a risk with him?

Amen.