

The Calming of the Storm

Mark 4:35-41 - Littlebourne - 13th June 2021

The last two weeks we've seen Jesus teaching from a boat on the shores of the sea of Galilee. He's been teaching in parables, and now we get to evening. It's been another long day - just as we've seen before in last part of chapter 1, Jesus can get a lot done in a day.

When we look at Mark's gospel in comparison to the other gospels, we see Mark is brief and fast-paced. Most of the narrative that we see in Mark is shorter and less detailed than in the other gospels, but in this passage things are different.

Far from the usual brevity, we have seemingly unimportant details thrown in - Jesus was not just asleep, but asleep on a cushion at the stern. No other gospels include the fact that there were other boats.

So there's a good possibility that Mark has recorded the retelling of a first-hand account of this event, directly from one of those that were present in the boat. Few miracles would be likely to stay with the Apostles like this one, where they fear for their lives and then are extraordinarily saved.

v35-36

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36 And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him.

Jesus has just finished teaching the crowds in parables, from the boat. It's getting late, and he instructs the disciples that they will join him in the boat to sail to the other side of the sea, which is 7 miles or so away.

They are headed for the region of the Gadarenes, which we'll see next week, and it's not a huge distance.

Four of the disciples at least are fishermen from Galilee - they know not just sailing, but this body of water in particular. They would have known that the best weather was available at night - this is when the fishing would often be done.

In 1986, during a drought in which the waters of the sea of Galilee receded, a preserved boat was discovered and unearthed from the mud. Archaeologists have carbon dated this boat from 100 BC to 100 AD. It's probably indicative of the type of boat that would have been typically used by those traversing the sea of Galilee. It's 27 feet long, 7 1/2 feet wide, with 4 foot high sides at the highest, designed to be able to get close to shore. Four staggered rowers would propel the boat, or sails could be hoisted on a mast. So that might give an idea of the sort of boat that's being talked about here.

v37-38

And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

The sea of Galilee is 680 feet below sea level and surrounded by mountains. A cliff lined valley to the south funnels the wind. Changeable weather was to be expected.

The disciples who knew the sea well would have known about the potential for storms. So this must have been an extraordinary storm to have them worried for their lives.

"Don't you care we are perishing?" - They clearly fear for their lives, they're in a situation where their experience was stretched beyond its limits. The boat is filling up, time is running out and they realise that they will inevitably sink. And Jesus is in the boat with them.

We are not excepted from storms or hardships just because Jesus is with us. Christ's presence did not prevent a storm forming. There is not a guarantee of a smooth journey, even when Jesus is in the boat with you.

In fact, when we get to chapter 8, we'll see Jesus say (Mark 8 v 34-35):

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

Hardships and suffering is not just a possibility, it's to be expected, but Jesus is in those storms with us.

The disciples then go to Jesus. They say 'Don't you care?' because he's lying there in the back of the boat, asleep.

I think what they're getting at is Jesus' apparent lack of concern for the storm, and concern for his frightened friends, rather than wanting him to do something. The disciples will see Jesus do something and they react like they didn't expect it. They're concerned that Jesus sleeps through the storm, he's not fazed by it. He knows the storm won't be fatal.

Jesus is completely in control, but the disciples have their eyes on the problem around them, rather than on their saviour. Jesus told them they were going to the other side, but they quite naturally can't see beyond the current situation.

As we've seen before in Mark's gospel, Jesus is both man and God.

His humanity is expressed in his sleeping on a cushion at the back of the boat. Sleep is one thing that makes us different from God. Isaiah 40 (v28) says:

*The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary*

And Psalm 121 (v4) says:

Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

Jesus in sleeping is showing his human nature. But he quickly shows his deity too in the next verse:

v39

And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

Jesus' deity is established in his ability to calm the storm with just his command.

The same God that spoke into existence the sea they are floating on, now speaks to the storm, rebukes it and it obeys. Jesus calms the storm by his Word. The storm posed no problem for him, he just told it to stop. Jesus has authority over all creation.

Jesus is not a pale abstraction of God, he's not merely the image of God, he is God almighty. His word is what stills the sea and calms the winds.

There's a similarity between here and in chapter 1 (v25) where Jesus rebukes a demon and commands him to not talk. The same verb for rebuke is used (ἐπιτιμάω - epitimaō), the same verb for 'be still' or 'be silent' which translated more literally means 'be muzzled' (φιμόω - fee-mo'-o).

(And the rebuke verb is also used in chapter 3 v 12 where Jesus orders the unclean spirits to stay silent.)

So it doesn't say whether this storm is a demonically influenced event. But whether it's because of evil influences that Jesus uses this same sort of language to deal with this as he does with demons, or whether it's just Jesus' turn of phrase, it's clear that at his command, demon and nature alike are powerless to disobey him.

Regardless of the cause of the storm, Jesus in control and our job is to look to him as our help. He is in the boat with us.

And as the wind ceases, everything is calm. Nothing stirs. Except the disciples, who tremble.

v40

■ *He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"*

These disciples have seen Jesus doing the supernatural. They've seen his great power at work in his healing people, in his casting out of demons, in his ability to respond to his critics in ways that completely silence them. But they still haven't grasped the extent of his supernatural power. They've seen Jesus deal with human issues - sickness and sin - but now he controls nature too, and they maybe didn't expect that.

Notice that the storm was calmed not because the disciples had really strong faith. The disciples didn't really even think Jesus cared to do anything, if they even thought he could. Their faith was weak. But what mattered was not the strength of their faith, but the object of it. It was Jesus that calmed the storm and nothing the disciples could do would have made a difference to the storm itself. Only the supernatural power of God could cause the storm to vanish in an instant.

That situation must have increased their faith in Jesus greatly. If the storm had not occurred, how would Jesus have shown his power? How would the disciples have seen Jesus for who he is? They need to see Jesus clearly and be constantly taught his great power. Likewise, we have all this information about Jesus, we have scripture, we have testimonies, we have examples in our own lives of answered prayer or God's power at work, we still need reminding that God is in control and that we are to rely on him.

We all have a tendency to forget about God until we think we need him. Sometimes we need a problem that we can't fix in our own ability to teach us to trust in God. You really know that God is with you when he delivers you from hardship.

James 1:2-3:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

For the disciples, the storm increased their faith, rather than diminished it. If there was no storm, there would be no reason to trust God, no reason to think Jesus was that powerful.

Jesus treats the disciples with great patience. All they have seen and still they don't have much faith, but Jesus looks after them and will continue to keep them safe. In chapter 6, we'll see a similar situation, where the disciples are out on the sea again, and a storm comes, the disciples are having difficulty and Jesus walks on the water to meet them and calm the storm. His rescuing them from danger is no one-off event, his power does not diminish.

v41

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?"

'Great fear'. It seems like the disciples are as afraid of Jesus as they are of the storm. Maybe they should be. Whatever power the storm had, Jesus has greater power than that.

In the Greek, three times the word 'great' is used. In Greek it's 'mega', meaning large, great, loud, surprising. It's used once for the great storm, once for the great calm and now for the great fear that the disciples experience after witnessing the great calm that followed the great storm.

When the storm came, the disciples were afraid. After the storm, in the great calm, the disciples are 'mega' afraid. They've never seen anything like this. This person, Jesus, so unlike anyone else they've ever met - they've never seen this kind of power, this kind of holiness, majesty, transcendence. In his presence, they cannot help but tremble.

I think the disciples are coming to understand more of who Jesus is. That he's more than what they expect from a messiah, that he has more than just a bit of God's power. He's much greater than they realised.

Remember when Jesus first calls Peter (Luke 5), who immediately upon seeing Jesus' power falls to his knees and says 'depart from me, for I am a sinful man'. To see the power and presence of God almighty puts into perspective our own selves. When we know God and his redemption, our masks slip so we can see ourselves as we really are - creatures, sinners, yet forgiven and adopted.

Their terror at the storm was totally eclipsed. The disciples no longer fear for their lives, but they do fear - but a better fear of wonderment, reverence, worship towards Christ.

Conclusion

So what have we learned?

Storms are to be expected - even with Jesus in the boat with them, the storm came. But storms can strengthen our faith. With Jesus, they are to develop us rather than destroy us.

The disciples had their eyes on the problem, not the problem solver. They were more concerned with their situation than their saviour. But Jesus was with them even though they weren't looking to him. When storms come, we should turn to Jesus, who can take us through them.

We've seen that Jesus is both sleeping human and commanding God. He is man that had an exhausting day, who endured storms himself and the creator God, Lord of all. He can sympathise with all hardships we face and he faced worse himself, yet is above all hardships, reigning over all creation.

We should fear God more than the things of this world. Not only because he is more powerful than anything else that we face, but because right fear of God leads us to trust in him and turn from our wrong ways of thinking.

In John 16:33, Jesus says:

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."