

When it storms around us

Mark 4:35-41

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We have just read about Jesus and his disciples, how they ended up in the middle of a storm. They were in their little boat on the middle of the Lake of Galilee – and it was really dangerous. Just as we in our lives meet with storms: problems and situations that can be really dangerous.

What are the storms you are experiencing these days? What are the waves that make your life insecure? I think we cannot avoid thinking of the political, social and economic marsh we are in right now here in Egypt. How to respond to such storms?

We can take an example from the eagles, those magnificent birds; they have a special way of dealing with storms. Noted for their size, strength, and powers of flight and vision, eagles know when a storm is approaching long before it breaks and they will fly to some high spot to wait for the winds to come.

When the storm hits, the eagle sets its wings so that the wind will pick it up and lift it above the storm. While the storm rages below, this clever bird is soaring above it. It does not escape the storm but simply uses the storm to elevate it to safety.

Can the storms in our life elevate us to greater heights?

Jesus in his humanity

Jesus and his disciples experienced an awfully dangerous storm on the lake. The gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke describe the event; the leaders of the early church remembered it very well – they were with Jesus in that boat.

Jesus had had very busy days in his hometown of Capernaum; he had been teaching and preaching and people had come in large numbers to hear him speak, and for healing.

Because there were so many, and they pressed closer and closer, he had been preaching from a boat so that people on the waterside were forced to keep some distance. He had been preaching on a mountainside, he had been in the homes of people; he drove out demons, he healed sick people, he told many parables to the people, like the one on the mustard seed we discussed here last week.

And now, when evening came and the sun went down, he was totally exhausted. So Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let us go over to the other side of the lake.'

The disciples did not waste time. They took Jesus away from the crowd, and into the boat. St Mark adds that they took him 'just as he was'.

Just as he was: without refreshment of food, or preparation for the trip. He was tired, exhausted, in need of rest and sleep and there was no time for preparations if they wanted to get away from the crowds right now.

They went to the eastside of the lake, because that was a quiet area with not too many people – and they were not Jewish either. So they hoped for some time for relaxation.

Jesus had hardly entered the boat and left the people behind, or he slept deeply. Exhausted as every normal human being would be. He was a human being like us.

The Sea of Galilee was about 20 x 10 km in size; from west to east would be about 10 kilometres.

Did the disciples forget to look at the weather? Did they not see the storm coming? Or was this one of those sudden furious storms that sometimes fall on that lake? Around the lake there are some high mountains and winds can suddenly develop and make the waters very dangerous for a small finishing boat.

Jesus with us

Following and obeying Jesus was risky for the disciples! Jesus brought them into this storm. If we follow him, we may also end up in stormy waters. His presence in our life is exciting, but not always easy.

Jesus had preached to large crowds in the days before the storm. Many of those believed in Him. But they never got into trouble when the storm hit the lake. It was only a small group that followed Jesus into the boat. Most people stayed behind.

It seems that there is a difference in believing Jesus, and in truly following him. If we want to truly follow Him, then we are close to him, that is the upside. But it also leads us into difficult situations, that is the downside.

Take the present situation in Egypt. Christians do not have too many problems in Egypt. But if we want to be truly obedient to the words of our Lord, it's a different story.

If we lock ourselves in our churches, we do not face too many problems. We do not notice much of the storms... But if we obey our Lord and we want to be a light, a witness in the midst of society – then we experience dangerous storms and high waves.

In Psalm 9 we have read that we can have confidence in the face of those problems:

The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.
Those who know your name trust in you, for you,
Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.

God does not forsake people in need. In the midst of your problems, your difficulties, your storms, he is there! In the gospel story, we see how the storms and the waves are directly opposed to Jesus and his followers but our Lord is there with them.

But if “The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble”, how in the world could Jesus sleep!

His disciples were perplexed that Jesus did nothing and they accused him: “You brought us into this, and while we drown, you do nothing!”

I am sure you are every now and then in situations where you wonder: “Why does God allow this to happen to me!” The disciples were probably so scared that they accused Jesus. ‘Do you not care for us?’

This question was the outcome of their fear and confusion, but also, and that is the good side, from their deep faith and knowledge that Jesus could actually save them.

God prefers honest anger to a pious lack of interest. He loves it when people bang with their fists on his door for help. Better than people who stop banging.

And he does help. Jesus was with them in the boat. Nothing could go wrong.

And you know what? Most people only see God, and Jesus, when they are drowning. Maybe that is why God often waits much longer than we like, with coming to our rescue. We take so long to realize that we need him and that all of our own efforts to help ourselves, are so insufficient.

St Augustine preached about the dangers of the storm and the waves in our life. Interestingly, his focus was not so much on bad governments, or the economy, or wild religious leaders. His focus was more on the problems that our own hearts create.

As a boat on the sea is exposed to a thousand dangers –pirates, quicksands, hidden rocks, storms– so man in this life, is surrounded by with dangers, arising from the temptations of Hell, from the occasions of sin, from the scandals or bad counsels of men, from [the desire for] human respect, and, above all from the passions of our corrupt nature (St. Augustine, Sermon 51 for the Fourth Sunday After Epiphany).

The truly grave dangers are not political, but in our heart. They have to do with our own choices.

The advise of St Augustine is this:

[All these internal storms] should not cause [us] to lose confidence. When you find yourself assaulted by a violent passion [...] take whatever steps you can to avoid the occasions [of sin] and place your reliance on God [...]: when the tempest is violent, the pilot [of the ship] never takes his eyes from the light which guides him into the harbour. In like manner, we should keep our eyes always turned to God, who alone can deliver us from the many dangers to which we are exposed. (St. Augustine, Sermon 51 for the Fourth Sunday After Epiphany).

Jesus stills the storm

So the disciples were right to wake Jesus up. He was the one who could help. God is a refuge for the oppressed and a stronghold in times of trouble. So hammer on the doors of God when you are in need. When storms overtake your life. When your circumstances are bad or when you are tempted to do wrong.

Jesus had every reason to be upset. The disciples suggested he did not care about them. But Jesus did not rebuke his friends. He instead rebuked the storm and the waves.

And something very remarkable happened. The winds died down, and also immediately the waves were gone. Usually after a storm dies down, the sea remains wild with waves for a while. But suddenly the night was totally quiet again. Even the surface of the sea was smooth as a mirror.

Our Lord is truly human. He was exhausted from hard work, and he slept. But he was also divine. He could speak to the winds and the waves, and they obeyed. He is the Lord of nature.

After Jesus saved his disciples from drowning, he asked them: “Why ARE you so afraid?”

He did not ask: “Why WERE you afraid.” After he had stilled the storm, they were still afraid - no longer of the sea and of drowning, but of Jesus himself. They were terrified of Jesus. Who is this! He even commands nature, the wind and the sea. This was the fear of God!

‘Do you still have no faith?’ Jesus does not speak of faith that the storm goes down – it had already gone down. He speaks of faith in Him – that he is God indeed.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is present in our circumstances. He is fully human and understands your fear and your problems. He is also fully divine. He can change all things.

Ephrem the Syrian, a mystic from the 4th century, expressed it well:

The ship carried his humanity, but the power of his godhead carried the ship and all that was in it." (Homily on our Lord 50)

The episode of the calming of the storm helps us to not lose the supernatural way of looking at things in our life. A Christian's life is like a ship and Jesus, the Son of God, is with us. He is with us, understanding our struggles, and he is around, protecting us.

"Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles." (Isaiah 40:31)

Like the eagles, when the storms come to us, we too can rise above the storm by setting our minds and our belief toward our heavenly Father and his Son Jesus Christ. If we believe, He will enable us to ride the winds of sickness, tragedy, failure and disappointment in our lives.

It is not the burdens of life that weigh us down; it is how we handle them. And we can handle them with confidence.

Conclusion

So what to do? For those who want to follow Jesus, there is no escaping from the problems of life. And your life may be stormy right now – the boat ride may be rocky. Ask God to help you, and trust Him, that He will steer you to quieter waters.

But in any case, whether it storms right now or whether the sea of your life is quiet right now – if He is in the boat, you will do well. Trust in him!

And be sure to stay in the boat. Be where Jesus is. And where your fellow believers are. In times of trouble, that is where we get our encouragement. In the community of the saints.

Then, like an eagle, even when it storms, we can ride the storm. Your faith in the Lord, in his nearness and his divinity, and the encouragement of each other, makes us confident that he loves to help you and that he can help you. No circumstances, nothing can separate us from the love of God!

Amen