

PROPER 07 B

Mark 4:35-41

While Jesus Slept They Nearly Drowned

“Who is this man? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

“Who is this man?” Who is this who calls us cowards
because we are afraid of the storm?

Who can this be who seems to be asleep at the moment of danger?

Who can this be who speaks a word of power
so that the wind drops and there is a dead calm?

Read on in the story, and you will find him among the tombstones
where there was a raving lunatic with hell raging inside him,
and again the word is spoken and there is a dead calm.

Read on, and you are with a father whose little daughter is dying,
with a woman suffering twelve years from hemorrhages.

Who can this be who walks into the dark center
of the human storm and out again
leaving a peace that passes all understanding?

The disciples were puzzled people as they watched him.

We are a puzzled people as we meet this Christ today
in the pages of the New Testament
or in the life of someone we know.

The Church, of course, has its official answers,
its venerable statements to tell us who he is.

But no form of words can ever capture him,
and no organization can contain him.

Today, more than ever, he seems to break free
from the religious establishment and confront
a bewildered generation with the mystery of his presence.

Those who left his Church years ago are wondering
why they cannot ever quite forget him, while youth in revolt
against conventional religion have an odd feeling
that in some ways, perhaps, he is on their side.

Who is this man? The artists have responded,
and each one seems to see a different Christ.

The novelists, the dramatists, and the moviemakers
have responded – and no one satisfies you or me,
that this is, really the Christ we know.

Yet no one can say that the image of Christ

has faded into the mists of a million interpretations.

He looms upon this generation with an undiminished charisma
and a power to change the lives of men.

He is not lost in the shadows of history.

Even now, a poem is being written of Christ;

a glittering stained glass window is being erected
in which he glows in the colors of today.

In an attic in Greenwich Village

a girl fashions her vision of Christ in clay.

Somewhere a broken life is being mended
by something called his **“grace”**.

His strange peace is descending on some troubled spirit;

and food is being flown in to rescue starving children in his name.

Within his Church this Man is still puzzling

and consoling us with his presence. Christians today share

with many other groups of people, a concern for social justice,

for freedom, for world peace; but if we have no plus to bring,

no compelling vision, no faith that reaches

beyond our human limits,

no confidence that there is a mighty Spirit on the side of the good

for which we struggle, then why have a church at all?

Christ is that plus, that vision, that faith, that Spirit.

When, in our churches today, we seek the crux of the matter,

as the word suggests, we find a cross.

The storms of our world converge on the Man we see there,

and we ask again – in the accents of 2024 –

“Who is this man?”

I bring you this storm scene from the Lake of Galilee

because it raises the crucial question of our confidence

in the God we meet in Christ.

And it does so, not in abstract argument

but in a living situation of danger and distress.

The words of Christ reach us wherever we are today:

“Why are you frightened? Are you still without faith?”

There are times when we could reply: ***“I’m not all that frightened.***

I think I have enough faith to see me through.” But there are

other times when fear takes hold and our faith seems to evaporate.

I once met a man in an airport who was terrified to get on the plane.

Later he told me the reason. On his previous flight,

The plane had suddenly dropped like a stone a thousand feet.

It was an emergency measure on the part of the pilot

who had had warning that another plane was on his level.

But the effect on the passengers was terrifying.

Many of us, even if we have never flown,

know something of this dropping sensation

when suddenly the bottom falls out of life

and what we relied on, wasn't there anymore.

Danger, catastrophe, a crashing of hopes – and who is this who says:

“Why are you frightened? Are you still without faith?”

Who is this Man?

He is, above all, the Man who asks for faith,

faith in the God who lives in him. And he asks for it,

not just when he is seated on a hillside by the Lake of Galilee

or when the sun is shining, or the flowers are in bloom,

and thousands are basking in the beauty of his words.

He asks for it in the storm.

This is where we meet him now. He was there with the disciples

when the wind came lashing down and the little boats
were rocking in the gale. He asks for it as he sets his face
to go to Jerusalem knowing the horrors that await him there.

In a strange way he still speaks to us from the middle of the storm.

Too often when we hear the word **“Christ”** today we think of
a shadowy figure to be sought in the gloom of the sanctuary.

Of course, he is there and we need the quiet to commune with him.

But he is also right there in the storm. I find that some people
resist being faced with the realities of war, starvation,
disease, and racial hatreds.

They don't like seeing a picture of grubby children in a ghetto
with the caption: **“Of such is the Kingdom of God.”**

They want soft lights, soothing music and a bright picture of
a handsome Christ surrounded by scrubbed
and happy boys and girls. I don't blame anyone who says:

“I don't come to church

to get another dose of the horrors I can see on TV

or the worries that the talking heads force upon me,”

and sometimes we overdo the business of

holding up the magnifying glass to our messy world.

The Church must have something else to say.

But, if we are looking for Christ, here is where we begin.

He is right in the center of our troubles with his question:

“Are you still without faith?”

This is why I have confidence in him.

The Son of God was born in a slum;

he mixed with the physically, mentally and morally diseased,

and he died a squalid and horrible death.

Unless we know this, we cannot begin to discover who he is.

There’s nothing that revolts us in our world,

Nothing that makes us heartsick and afraid that he did not know –

right down to the edge of that black pit

where God seems to have forgotten us.

He’s been through it. That’s why I trust him. That’s why

I can let him ask me the questions: ***“Why are you frightened?”***

Are you still without faith?”

Now listen to the scream from the throats of really frightened men.

They roused the sleeping Christ shouting:

“Don’t you care that we are about to die?”

(One of the reasons why I accept this story factually is

That I can’t imagine one of the apostles inventing this

and inserting this shaming moment of panic. It all rings true.)

“Don’t you care?”

It was a vote of no confidence at the moment of despair.

I called these puzzled people. They were no more than that.

They were terrified and rebellious people.

Here was the one who had told them to trust the heavenly Father.

Here was the one who called for absolute trust and confidence.

Here was their leader, their master,

the one to whom they had confided their whole lives.

And, in a moment of supreme danger, he was sound asleep.

Asleep, while they were all about to drown.

I can’t help thinking of that other time in the Garden of Gethsemane

when it was the disciples who were asleep

while their Master was agonizingly awake.

For him the danger of the storm on the lake

was as nothing compared with the evil that surrounded him
on that dark night.

For him, it is evident that to drown is a minor thing
compared to being overwhelmed by the forces of spiritual darkness.

If the disciples were puzzled by his calm in the storm,
they were even more puzzled by his agony in the garden.

Yet even there his faith held firm.

“Father! my Father! All things are possible for you.

Take this cup away from me.

But not what I want, but what you want.”

“Don’t you care?” The entire story of this Man shows that,
more than anyone who ever lived among us, **he did care!**

And we shall find him – and know something of who he is –
as we join in his caring.

There are many out in the storm just now –

the sick, the starving, victims of injustice and of war.

As we begin to care

we shall discover that the God of Jesus Christ is not asleep.

For he is there caring more than we ever can.

And we shall meet him in the storm.

But I must let this whole story speak. We find out who he is,
when we exercise our faith
as we care more for our fellow men in distress.

But there is something else that is too often forgotten
in our thinking today.

“The wind died down and there was a great calm....

Who is this man? Even the wind and the waves obey him.”

There is something here for us puzzled people
to hear in the accents of today.

Whatever the sequence of events that day on the Sea of Galilee,
Christ comes to us in this story as the one who was not only
in the storm: he was beyond it.

There is another dimension here than the merely human.

I cannot so read the Gospels that everything supernatural
is expunged, and I am left with a Christ
whose caring has no roots except in the divine dimension.

“Who is this man? Even the wind and the waves obey him.”

Yes; it is the same one who drove the devils from the possessed,
who spoke words of forgiveness and made a prostitute a saint,
who claimed a Kingdom ***“Not of this world,”***
and who returned from death and hell
to give his disciples a confidence that turned the world upside down.

There is a spiritual power in him as of one who is not only in,
but above the storm. When I meet him. I meet my God.

These are big statements.

Yet how many here are listening to me now

who could tell of how they met him in the storm.

I don't mean a bouquet of success stories –

for which of us has not known the blackout of faith

and prayers that seemed to get no answer?

That the wind and the sea obey him doesn't always mean

that the storm is miraculously lifted.

But there remains the power of the strange peace –

the still point in the center of the hurricane –

which Christ can give and no one can explain.

Who is this Christ?

We meet him in the storm and find him when we too begin to care.

But we meet him also as he comes across the waves saying:

“Be of good cheer; it is I. Be not afraid.”

Amen.