

A Reflection for Sunday 20th June 2021 ~ Trinity 3, from Stacy Nelson Taylor, Ordinand

Do you not care that we are perishing?

What a bold question to ask one's teacher, one's rabbi. This man who had healed many and cast out unclean spirits. This man who had just been teaching about the Kingdom of God through parables.

Do you not care that we are perishing?

What a question to ask of this man who had called the disciples by name and with whom the disciples had travelled and lived. What a question to ask a friend.

Do you not care that we are perishing?

What a question to ask God.

And yet, in the midst of crises, when the waves and the wind crash, when the confidence we have in the normality of our way of life fails, perhaps it is a natural question.

Do you care God?

Seemingly a question that has been asked throughout time.

In the scripture reading today, it is the disciples who ask. And Jesus answers by commanding a great calm. At the surface level, over the wind and the waves. But for the early church, deeper meanings might have been recognised.

These followers of the way, mostly communities of the Jewish diaspora and Gentile 'God-fearers', might have heard echoes of the creation story.

As they had heard in the synagogues, it was God who by speaking gathered the waters together when He made the world. It was God alone who could calm and order the primeval forces of chaos that many of the Near Eastern cultures believed were part of the deep, part of the sea. And so, as the waves and wind responded to his commands, he revealed even more than a miraculous act over nature, he displayed authority over the powers of chaos, and by extension evil.

These same early believers may also have heard similarities to the story of Jonah. In both, we have experienced men of the sea panicking during a storm. In Jonah, it is the mariners and in Mark the fisherman disciples. In both, the key person, Jonah or Jesus respectively, is asleep in the boat. In both, someone has to rouse them and looks to them for how to be saved.

Yet there are differences. One difference is that in Jonah, the crew, the mariners, although not Hebrew, seemed to understand God and, in recognising His divine power, properly worshiped him. In Mark, the crew, the fisherman disciples, in seeing Jesus' divine power, seemed more confused.

I wonder, what were the disciples expecting? Did they expect Jesus to come alongside them and reign in the sail? Or to help them bail the water out of the swamped boat? Were they expecting a miracle knowing he had healed and cast out demons?

Rather like the wild and unruly mustard tree that came from the tiny seed, we see again the surprising work of God. Somehow, it is not what the disciples expected – Jesus spoke, and the wind and the sea obeyed.

Perhaps in choosing to include this experience in the Gospel of Mark, the author encouraged those who would hear it to explore this difference in response. The outsiders, the mariners from Jonah's story, responding to the calming of the sea by offering a sacrifice to the Lord and making

vows. The insiders, the disciples who were with Jesus, responding to the calming of the seas by asking each other “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

It seems like the disciples once again get it wrong, a recurring theme in the Gospel of Mark. They seem to be scared and confused. And Jesus calls them out for it, “Why are you afraid or cowardly? Have you still no faith?” An uncomfortable passage to be sure. One would not point to the disciples as an example after this story. They just can’t seem to figure out who Jesus is. They think they know and then Jesus surprises them again by being more, greater, than what they expect and by doing things differently than what they anticipate. We will see this again and again through Jesus’ ministry, all the way up to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Do the disciples really have no faith?

That seems a little harsh. I mean, they did seek out Jesus when they were afraid. And, they have been with him and will continue with him after this journey. Perhaps Jesus’ question is really an expression of frustration that regardless of the time together, the miracles and parables, even the extra discussions around what the parables mean, the disciples are not yet able to see and recognise fully who he is, all that he is.

Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, it is easy for us to think we would have known. It is easy to imagine that we might have responded better, but perhaps it is worth asking, how do we respond when God’s answer is different from the one we expect or desire? How do we react when we learn anew that God isn’t the idea we have formed but is more powerful, more righteous, and so much greater than we ever could have imagined?

It seems like the disciples should have been excited by the experience of seeing Jesus speak peace to chaos with the authority and power of God. And yet, they were but human. Jesus acted in a way that was so far beyond their expectations, so powerful, they did not know how to process what had happened. But they were not rejected by Jesus for their fear or confusion. They were Jesus’ closest friends and companions, to whom he entrusted his ongoing ministry.

I confess, in the stories of these messy disciples, I have hope. They often get things wrong, but Jesus still uses them. They sometimes confuse who they think Jesus should be with who Jesus is, but Jesus still loves them. At times, they are confused and afraid, and Jesus gives them peace.

They even ask questions we might be afraid to voice. Do you care about my life? Do you care about what is happening right now? Do you care that I am struggling here? And Jesus doesn’t condemn them for asking. In this reading, Jesus answers the question, not with words, but in a tangible way. Not as expected, but with the gift of a great peace.

Amen