

Lessons 2 Corinthians 6: 1 – 13 St Mark 4: 35 – 41

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Enable us, O Lord, to cherish Your Word; that through patience and comfort of the Scriptures we may have hope. Sanctify us through Your Word; grant us the peace that only You can bring. Amen.

The Old Testament story of David and Goliath is dramatic and exciting: David, a youth, ruddy and good-looking, stands defiantly before the Philistine warrior, Goliath. Hardened by years of war and fighting, Goliath looks at the youth with disdain. The king, Saul, reluctantly lets David face Goliath. In the end, with his five smooth stones, David triumphs and the giant is slain. In the Bible we read:

Then David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone; and he slung it and struck the Philistine in his forehead, and he fell on his face to the earth. So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him.

Once dead, David stands over Goliath, draws his sword and cuts off the head of the Philistine warrior. Dramatic, exciting and bloody!

In the Gospel of St Mark, we read the equally dramatic story of Jesus commanding the wind and the sea to be calm: ‘Peace, be still!’ he says. When

it is evening, Jesus and His disciples set out in a boat; a windstorm blows up and the waves beat into the boat. Jesus is asleep in the stern, asleep on a pillow. He is woken by the disciples who fear for their lives. Once awake, He calms the storm and rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. The story ends with the disciples saying to one another, ‘Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!’ These are great, great stories, memorable faith narratives, but *not* to be read literally.

The story of Jesus calming the storm is, for me, a powerful, evocative meditation but, first, let me say that it stands squarely within the mythology and *midrash* of the ancient world. In this story, some scholars hear an echo from the Old Testament story of Jonah. Like Jesus, Jonah is asleep in the boat when a great wind is hurled upon the sea and, like the disciples, the mariners are afraid and rouse Jonah saying that they are about to perish and he should call on his God to calm the storm. Although other details are different, the story ends when the storm is calmed and the mariners fear and reverence the LORD for His power over the waves.

Other scholars say that the story of Jesus calming the storm is a *midrash* story, a re-working of verses from the Psalms. In Psalm 107, we read:

Those who go down to the sea in ships
Who do business on great waters,

They see the works of the LORD,
And His wonders in the deep.
For He commands and raises the stormy wind,
Which lifts up the waves of the sea.....

Their souls melt because of trouble...
And are at their wits' end.
Then they cry out to the LORD in their trouble,
And He brings them out of their distresses.
He calms the storm,
So that its waves are still.

Some scholars hear in this story of boat and storm an echo from Homer's *Odyssey*. Written around nine hundred years earlier, the Greek myth portrays Odysseus asleep in the hold of a ship. Odysseus had just left Aeolus, whom Zeus had made the master of the winds. Aeolus had given Odysseus a sack which contained 'the winds that howl from every quarter.' The sack is lashed fast with a silver cord. In Homer's poem, while Odysseus is asleep in the hold of the ship, his men 'loosed the sack' and 'all the winds burst out.' Many of the details are different but what is worth noting is that the wind is created by Zeus, the Father of the gods, and Aeolus, in the name of Zeus, has power over the winds and the sea.

One final comparison: in the Gospels, Jesus is often portrayed as the *new* Moses, whose stature is that of God's greatest servant. At the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds, Moses, with staff in hand, raises his arms over the sea and by a strong east wind the LORD causes the sea to go back and, while the LORD holds the

waters on both sides, the people walk through on dry ground. Through His servant Moses, the LORD commands the winds and the seas.

In the ancient world, people saw God everywhere: they saw the strength of a tree and knew that God had given that tree its strength; they saw the power of the wind and knew that God had caused the wind to exist and blow and they saw the power of the sea and knew its power came from God. Through the lens of our materialism, we filter out God and see only the physical causes of nature. By contrast, our ancestors, while understanding less about the physical causes of nature, understood that every dimension of creation rested in the hand of God. The story of Moses, of Jonah, and the words of the psalmist and the story of Jesus calming the storm are all stories about the power of God. The stories are not to be read literally; they are not fantastic, magic miracles. They are faith narratives; they witness to faith and they are told to inspire faith. In and through the written Word, God speaks: the Living Word comes alive for us.

In a meditative reading of Scripture, of the story of Jesus calming the storm, what do we see? The first thing we see is the darkness: we are told that it is evening. Darkness is always important: God is illusive, always beyond definition, and so God dwells in darkness. In this darkness, we see the power of the wind and the sea, the power of nature, the magnitude and destructive power of nature, and we see the smallness of the disciples, their helplessness

and vulnerability. At the centre, we see Jesus: we sense His peace, His calm, His strength and we learn in our hearts that as great as the powers of nature and universe may be, these are as nothing compared to the sacred peace of God. There is a deep peace, a stillness, an eternal silence, at the heart of God, which the trials and troubles and powers of this world and universe cannot disturb. In a prayerful, meditative reading of Scripture, God in Jesus comes to us. In the darkness, we see His light, and we learn again that we are precious, embraced, loved and cherished. It is there on the page, a doorway into another world, another reality.

From something small, a story of just seven verses, a life is transfigured. What strikes me about the faith narrative of David is not so much the bloody violence, which we must see as a feature of the time, but David's faith at the centre of the story. I do not believe that God willed the brutal death of Goliath or that such brutality lies at the heart of God. What I do hear in this story, in the midst of its cultural setting, is the faith of David. In the face of a destructive force, which may have seemed as strong as the winds and the sea, David says, 'You come to me with sword and spear and javelin. I come to you in the name of the LORD...'. At the centre of this ancient faith narrative, amidst all the action, blood and violence, there is a rock, a place of stillness, silence and peace. David knows that, come what may, his life stands or falls on the loving strength of God. St Paul says the same: in tribulation, in needs, in distresses, in

imprisonments, in sleeplessness, in every affliction, we are ministers of God: God is the strength and foundation of our life. I know that in the midst of a trial, in the midst of suffering, in the midst of hardship, we may become overwhelmed by tears and broken by circumstance, but my experience and my prayer for you is keep going: God walks with you: focus and re-focus your heart, mind and soul, so far as you can, on the mercy and loving-kindness of God. In the darkness, we see the light of God in the midst of the storm and, in time, we will feel its warmth and we will know that we are cherished, loved and embraced.

Let me close with a prayer from the Celtic writer David Adam. Let us pray.

Lord, open my eyes
To the wonder of the world
And Your Presence within it.
Lord open my ears
To the calls of creation
And to Your voice quiet and near.
Lord open my heart
To the love of others
And to Your love close and real.
Lord open each sense and make aware
Of the wonder and beauty always there.

Amen.