

12th Sunday of Year B

(Four sermons)

IN EVERY STORM WE NEED NOT FEAR

Mk. 4:35-41

The Sea of Galilee is known to be calm one moment and without any warning to be a raging sea the next. It was calm when Our Lord and His Apostles boarded their small boat but very soon high waves threatened to overturn it. Even though some of these men were seasoned fishermen, they were now frightened. All through this storm Jesus, their Master, was sound asleep. Perhaps the toll of a busy day had taken its effect on Him. In desperation the Apostles awoke Him with the words, "Master do You not care that we are going down."

We can all see ourselves in this story. No life is all calm and peaceful. We all find ourselves at some time caught in some trial or faced with what seems an insurmountable problem as though we are caught in a storm at sea. At times like these we may wonder has God forsaken and forgotten us. Does He care?

Many good parents today see the spiritual mess their children make of their lives. They gave them a good example of loving their faith, attending Sunday Mass and receiving the sacraments. Now going to Church is the last thing they have on their minds. They live together without the blessing of God and the church on their union. Some of these parents are tempted to be angry with God and ask, "Where did we go wrong? What more could we have done?" They pray earnestly for their children to change their ways. They even have Masses said for them and wonder why God does not answer their prayers. They ask, "Why doesn't God intervene and stop them living like this?" Such a reaction is understandably human and is so like the Apostles who were caught in that storm and said, "Master, do You not care?"

What those parents must remember is that God our Father and our blessed Lady do care, for they too are parents of their children, and they love their children even more than they do. If parents' hearts ache when their children do not practice their faith, God their Father's and Mary their mother's hearts ache even more than theirs. God the Father and Mary too are in the stormy boat along with them. So, let them hang in that boat with God the Father and Mary, continue praying for their children and leave them in their safe and capable hands.

This Gospel was written for the early persecuted Church to give them hope. They were few in number and were threatened with extinction. They, like the Apostles, were not to fear because Christ was with them in the very heart of the suffering.

Lord Jesus, we must believe that whenever our lives are in a storm we are not on our own, we will not perish and drown for You are there in the storm with us and You will give us an inner peace and courage to get through this and any storm that life may throw at us. We can truly say, "Be not afraid, all is well for Jesus is with us."

WHAT TO REMEMBER IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Mk 4:35-41

"Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey Him." Today's Gospel ends with these words. Let us begin by saying that there is one thing we can be certain about

and that is that You Lord have not faded into the shadows of history. Your presence and influence in the Church and in the modern world is being strongly felt today.

Somewhere in some language someone is writing a poem about You. Somewhere a sculptor, with chisel in hand, is carving Your image in stone. Somewhere the pieces of a stained-glass window are coming together on which the rays of sunlight will illumine an artistic impression of You. Somewhere a broken life is being mended in Your name. Somewhere a load of food is being shipped, in Your name, to some drought-ravaged-part of the world. Yes, Who can this be?

Today, I would like to emphasize another truth about Jesus. He is the one to whom we turn in times of crisis. When the bottom drops out of life, and all seems to be lost, it is to Him we turn. That is the real meaning behind today's Gospel in which Mark was writing to a persecuted Church when the followers of Jesus were paying dearly for their faith. Many of them had been excommunicated from their synagogue; some of them had been killed for refusing to worship the emperor. They felt just like the Apostles trying to cross a stormy sea in a small boat. Their very survival seemed in doubt. Mark recalled this event to remind them and us of three great truths.

Firstly, in times of crisis, we are never alone. Jesus is always there. He was with the Apostles when the storm came crashing down upon them. Granted, that did not seem to make much difference, at least for a while, but the fact remains that though the raging storm He was there. Christ had not abandoned them in their hour of need. The middle of a crisis may seem a strange place to find Christ. We are more inclined to look for Him in some quiet harbour, far removed from howling winds and roaring waves. This may be one reason why some of us come to Church – to escape a sordid world and refresh our souls with peace and quiet. All of us need that experience from time to time. However, if we are looking for Christ, and if we are intent on finding Him, the storm is a good place to begin our search.

Our Lord is right at home in the midst of chaos. He was born in a stable, grew up in a village with a bad reputation, spent much of His time with people who were mentally, physically and morally sick. He died an ugly death, between two thieves and surrounded by a rabble. He has seen it all, right down to the edge of that black hole where God Himself seems to have forsaken us. Christ knows about storms, both literally and figuratively. That is why we can trust Him, because He has been there before and He will be there again with us.

Secondly, we must remember that in times of crisis, Jesus cares. His Apostles had grave doubts about that. With rising panic in their voices, they cried, "Master, do You not care? We are going down!" Who can blame them for asking that question? When the storms of life threaten our security, our sanity, our very existence, it is not easy to sustain our trust in Divine providence. As we watch the world lurching from one crisis to another, how can we keep from wondering if God really cares?

That lingering doubt cannot be finally resolved by a story from the Bible or a sermon. I can offer assurances that Christ is always with us and will never let us down. We can read about those Apostles, and how they learned to trust Jesus. But when the raging storm, the crunch, comes to you and me, we have to make that discovery for ourselves.

Our Lord has taught us that life is somewhat like an echo. What we send out comes back to us. If we are merciful, we will obtain mercy. If we forgive, we will be

forgiven. Does it not stand to reason that if we care, we will know the caring of God? So, if we care for no one but ourselves, how can we ever believe that anyone else cares, even God? By the simple act of caring for others, we will encounter the vast caring of God.

Thirdly, we need to know that in times of crisis, Jesus is above every storm. At His command, “the wind dropped, and all was calm again.” Christ is presented not only in the storm, but above the storm. That was the real truth that Mark was sharing with the persecuted Church. This same Jesus Who had calmed the storm was the One Who made the blind see and the lame walk, the same One Who spoke a word of forgiveness that transformed a prostitute into a saint, the same One Who for us conquered death and the grave.

Lord Jesus, in times of crisis, when hope seems to be lost, let us remember this, that You sailed into the dark centre of a storm and out again, leaving a peace that no one could explain. You are still doing that today for us.

GOD IS PRESENT IN ALL STORMS OF LIFE

Job. 18:1,8-11; 2 Cor. 5:14-17 & Mk. 4:35-41

Storms are an accepted phenomenon of God’s creation. They stir up the elements and unleash the forces of nature onto an often unsuspecting neighbourhood. To encounter a violent storm on land is bad enough, but to be caught unawares in a storm while at sea is particularly frightening because there is nowhere to take shelter. We therefore have to choose between staying put in the boat and weathering the storm or jumping overboard and perhaps drowning in the sea.

In ancient Jewish biblical tradition, the destructive forces of nature concealed in the sea were described in terms of sea monsters which, from time to time, surfaced to unleash their fury. In recounting the miracle of the calming of the storm, the Gospel literally demonstrates that Jesus, as the Son of God, has absolute control over the forces of nature. “Even the wind and the sea obey Him,” exclaimed the dumbfounded disciples. In the Book of Job, we see God command the sea, “Come thus far, I said, and no farther; here your proud waves shall break.”

The story speaks to us also at a deeper, symbolic level by showing us how to deal with the storms of life. We call these the cares of life. The boat represents the community to which we belong, such as our family or Church or society. The crisis which is symbolised by the stormy sea can come from outside of us or from within us. Externally triggered crises would take the form of a bereavement, or the sudden loss of a job, or the infidelity of a spouse in a marital relationship. However, the stormy sea can also symbolise the crises which originate from within us such as a physical illness or a mental breakdown, or a chaotic surge of emotions – anger, lust, fear and guilt. When confronted with such crises, our lives are turned upside down and our relationships are tossed about violently. We can learn some important lessons about crises in life and how to handle them, by reflecting on today’s Gospel story.

Crises are rites of passage in our human and spiritual growth. In the Gospel passage, the disciples were in the process of crossing over from one side of the land to the other when the storm occurred. Likewise, life’s crises involve a crossing from one stage of growth to a higher, in the process of becoming transformed into a new creature in Christ. The pains experienced in a crisis are thus growth pains. And, like the storm at sea, crises descend on us quickly without much warning.

We have to stay put and face the crisis and not take the easy way out. In the Gospel story, the disciples, although in a panic, yet hold on to that boat. Jumping into the water would have been a disastrous solution which would have ended both their crisis and their lives as well. Similarly, in life's crises too, we must stand firm and resist the temptation to seek false solutions. For example, the infidelity of a spouse puts a severe crisis in a marriage. However, to rush off and end the marriage is not the solution to the crisis. If the couple can stay put and work through their crisis with God's help, then the marriage can not only be healed, but transformed into a deeper union than before.

In a crisis what we must never forget is that God is with us, even though He seems distant or non-existent. Jesus was asleep in the boat, seemingly oblivious to the storm, and so the disciples cried out to Him. We, too, should always turn to the Lord with faith during the crisis, even if He seems distant, because it is precisely in those moments that the Lord is nearest to us.

Lord Jesus, in every storm or crisis, You are with us. Your presence and power will make us emerge from the crisis strengthened, and with a deeper knowledge of God. After the calming of the storm, the disciples were filled with awe and were led to a deeper faith in You. Similarly, in the story of Job, after God had delivered him from his crisis, he confesses his more intimate knowledge of God. "I knew You by hearsay then, now I have seen You with my own eyes."

DOES GOD CARE?

Mk. 4: 35-41

On Friday, 4th January 2008 Len Bennett a 70 year old friend of mine, who illustrated my children's story book and Rosary books, and who lived in a Light House on Davaar Island in Argyle with his wife Rose and daughter Anne Marie, set out in his range rover to pick up guests who would be visiting their island. The island was a tourist attraction. When he never returned that evening his wife phoned the police and immediately a search party, including a helicopter, set out to find him. Hours later they found his range rover submerged in water with the driver's door open. Len must have tried to escape from the vehicle but of him there was no trace. After three days the search was called off, but his body was found six days later further up the coast.

We can only imagine what Rose and Anne Marie felt when Len was lost. I spoke to them both several times and they were numb in disbelief. I am sure they must have thought, "Where was God in all this and does He really care?"

In today's Gospel we see how the Apostles were tested. They were in a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee when a storm blew up. This was often known to happen. They were experienced seamen, but despite their efforts, the boat was on the verge of sinking. Meanwhile, Jesus was in the stern, sound asleep. Finally, in desperation, they awoke Him and said, "Master, do you not care? We are going down!" It is one thing to ask that question when all is calm and you are standing on dry ground. It is another thing to ask it when you are in the midst of the sea, surrounded by angry waves. The most serious questions about God come not from theory but from tragedy. When we are caught in a storm from which there is no escape, then the question becomes real and relevant, "Does God care?"

We should not dodge that question and be ashamed of it. Those Apostles would never have become the men we so greatly admire without that experience when they

doubted the concern of Christ and had the honesty to say so. That kind of struggle has always been a vital part of great living and of great faith.

When people raise that question, “Does God care?” they are at least facing the realistic facts. Living in this world can sometimes be dangerous as we can see with Len Bennett. Sometimes the danger materialises and turns into tragedy. There is a kind of easy-going faith in God that never wonders, that never struggles, that never doubts. I am not sure what kind of faith that is, but somehow it doesn’t seem to belong in this kind of world. But when a person stands with those first disciples and says to the Lord, “Master, do you not care?” that person is at least dealing with reality. He is facing the facts. He is seeing what great men and women of faith have always seen – that we live in a dangerous world, and that if we are going to believe in God at all, we must hold that faith in the midst of tragedy. Does God care? That question is neither impudence nor impertinence. It is an inevitable part of the only kind of faith that really fits into this kind of world.

Of course, we can’t stop there. We must go further and recognise that faith has always risen to its height in times of adversity. That unexpected storm, that almost sinking ship played a vital role in the lives of those early disciples. Without it they would never have been driven to doubt. They would not have wondered if the Lord had cared. They might never have learned that He did.

Symbolised in this story is a truth that has relevance for you and me. We commonly suppose that people are most inclined to believe in God when life is beautiful and easy. That supposition is not supported by the experiences of the great believers. Look at Our Lord Himself. Yes, He saw His heavenly Father in the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. But that wasn’t the place where His faith reached its height. That happened on Calvary where doubt was strong and faith was hard; when He cried out, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken Me?” It was also there where He came through His doubts and calmly said, “Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit.”

Lord Jesus, as long as we live in this world, we will probably never get finished with asking the question, “Does God care?” Let this story of the boat in the stormy Sea of Galilee remind us that in every storm in our lives You are there with us and that You do care.