

You have probably had the experience of being in a boat in rough weather. It may well have been an experience you are not keen to repeat. I can remember a couple of such experiences. In May 1974 I remember coming back from the continent on a hovercraft. The sea was pretty rough and the constant crashing down of the boat in the troughs between waves was horrible. But the other experience that stays in my mind was much worse. I was helping some friends in Dawlish with their boat business hiring out motor boats and small fibreglass rowing boats on the sea. One day the weather was too rough to hire out the boats and one of the men pointed to one of the rowing boats to which he had attached an outboard motor. He asked me if I wanted to join him on a trip down the coast to check the nets. Not wanting to appear a wuss I agreed. Bad decision in every way. As we motored down the coast the boat seemed to stand on end as we went over each wave. Despite wet weather gear I was soaked through in no time. When we got to the nets I was asked to hold on to the net to keep the boat still which meant I had to let go of the boat itself to which I had been clinging for dear life. While I did that my friend checked the nets and all he found were a few dog fish which he dropped in the bottom of the boat close to my feet.

Well I am alive to tell the tale though at times I thought I wouldn't be. It was not a great experience but at the end I had a very high regard for that boatman and the way he handled things on the very stormy sea.

Well as we continue our series 'on the beach' looking at Jesus at the seaside and especially his relationship with Peter we read from Mark 4 this account of a storm at sea. It is thought that Mark wrote his gospel from the recollections of Peter and so it is highly likely that what we have here are Peter's memories of this storm at sea. It probably wasn't an experience that he would have wanted to repeat but, like me, it left him with a very profound view of and respect for someone else who was in the boat. This event clearly left Peter with a much clearer picture as to who Jesus was and that is why Mark has included the event in his gospel that the readers, who were probably Christians in Rome suffering persecution for their faith, might be encouraged as they reflected on who this Jesus was whom they were following, even to death.

At the heart of the event are three questions:

1. "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" (Mark 4:38)
2. "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4: 40)
3. "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (Mark 4:41)

To understand the passage, why Mark included it, how it would help the original readers and what it has to say to us it is perhaps best to go backwards and start with the last question

1. Who is this?

We probably all know the events well but let's recap. Jesus has been teaching and they were coming towards the end of the day. He told them to take him across the lake to the other side so a number of boats set out. A great windstorm arose and the waves were crashing into the boat where Jesus was asleep at the back. The disciples were worried and woke him up with that first question, "don't you care if we drown?" Jesus got up in the boat, spoke to the wind and waves and suddenly it was completely calm. Then he addressed that second question to the disciples, "Do you still have no faith?" Now even more terrified than during the storm asked the third question, "Who is this?" That is the big question that Mark is addressing in the first 8 chapters of his book, who is this Jesus? Who is this who, can command evil spirits to come out of people (Mark 1:25), who can heal those suffering with leprosy (Mark 1:42), who can forgive sins (Mark 2:5) and now has authority through his word over the natural world? Who is this? That is the question Mark was asking and wants those of us reading the book to ask. The question is answered for us by Peter in Mark 8:29, "Peter answered, "You are the Christ.""" Peter had drawn together the threads of what he had heard from Jesus and seen him do and realised he is the Christ, the Messiah, the son of God. Mark then spends the next 8 chapters asking what sort of a Messiah is Jesus and gives the readers the answer in Mark 15:24 that he is the suffering servant, "And they crucified him".

This is what Jesus wanted his disciples to see, that he is God come to earth to be the rescuer of humanity. This is what Mark wanted his readers to see, that, while Nero may seem to have power, ultimately all power and authority lay in the hands of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is also what God wants us and our friends to see today. He wants us to ask of Jesus who is this? Then to see from Mark and the other gospels that Jesus is God, as we see from the power he showed, but God come for our salvation as shown through his death on the cross.

God has come into our world. Yes he has come in human form and therefore his nature, power and glory is hidden but it is there for us to see.

I was reading in the press this week about the new film 'the Lone Ranger' and there was a picture of the Lone Ranger with his distinctive mask and I thought well anyone can tell who that is. His person is not very well hidden. However with Jesus it was. Here was Mary's son the carpenter and it was only as he began to teach and showed authority through his teaching and then through his miracles to show his authority over, sickness and death, over the natural world and the supernatural world and the authority to forgive sin that Peter and others began to see who this man was and is.

This is our God come to us in human form to be our rescuer. Have you seen that yet?

The reason I turn this passage upside down and start with this question is that it is vital that we understand who Jesus is because then the rest of the questions here in this passage and indeed questions we might have about the passage fall into place.

I remember before I came to faith standing on the doorstep of a friend's house arguing with Jehovah's witnesses. We were talking about miracles and I was saying they couldn't happen. Jesus couldn't have done miracles – I hope no one ever hears just that sentence! Yet here I stand saying just the opposite why, because of who Jesus is. He is God and therefore as God nothing is beyond him. It is that which leads us to the second question.

2. Why are you so afraid?

If Jesus is God and has all power then why should these disciples be afraid? It didn't make sense. But of course it did as the second part of the question makes clear, "Do you still have no faith?" The answer was clear that at that time they didn't. They were still trying to work out who he was. They were not sure and therefore didn't know what he could do and if they could trust him.

I have never done a bungee jump and really am not likely to. But if I did I would carefully check the rope, the harness, the support frame and ask the question are you sure this will hold me? I would be afraid and I would have some but not much faith.

When the boatman said, "come on let's go check the nets", I did ask "are you sure" and when he told me he was I put my faith in him and it was justified even if the ride was a bit scary.

Jesus calls us, as he called Peter, to follow him, to put the whole of our lives in his hands. He does it on the basis that he is God but can we do it? Can we give over to him the whole of our lives in the same way that I got into that boat? Well only if we recognise who this man is. It is seeing Jesus as God that means we can have faith in him. Faith that he will only act for our good. Faith that he will not desert us or let us down. Faith that he is able to do so much in us and through us.

What Peter and the others learnt that day in the boat was not just a little more of who Jesus is but that they could trust him and that they were right to place their trust in him. It wasn't a comfortable ride but they learnt a valuable lesson, a lesson that perhaps could only be learnt in such circumstances.

In the movie, Parenthood, there is a scene where Gil, played by Steve Martin, and Karen, played by Mary Steenburgen, are discussing the difficulties and challenges of parenthood and life. Gil is frustrated and expressing his desire for some control and guarantees in life. Karen says, "Life is messy." Gil replies, "I hate messy!" Just then his grandmother (who is apparently suffering from some form of dementia) enters the room and shares a story.

Grandma explains, "You know, when I was young, Grandpa took me on a roller coaster. Up and down, up, down. Oh, what a ride. I always wanted to go again. It was just interesting to me that a ride could make me so frightened...so scared, so sick, so excited...and so thrilled all together. Some didn't like it. They went on the merry-go-round. That just goes around. Nothing. I like the roller coaster. You get more out of it."

When she has gone Karen says, “I happen to like the roller coaster, okay? As far as I'm concerned, your grandmother is brilliant.” To which Gil replies, “Yeah if she's so brilliant why is she sitting in our neighbour's car?”

Life is sometimes like being in a boat in a storm or like a roller coaster and the question then is where do I look for safety and help? Mark's readers faced with imprisonment or death may well have been very afraid and wondering is my faith worth all this?

Whatever it is you face tomorrow, the visit to the Doctors, the concern about family, the normality of another Monday, the pressure of work, the lack of work as we face these things and many others are we afraid or are we trusting Jesus?

The disciples were afraid because they didn't know enough of Jesus to know they could trust him. I hope that we do know enough of Jesus to face the things that lie ahead not in fear but in faith and to go through this week be it rollercoaster or merry go round resting sure in him or perhaps just clinging to him by our finger tips.

That is the way it is for many and even for some who know little or nothing of God but who in those roller coaster moments cry out to him.

I was listening to a new song out this week by Christina Grimmie – you can see how with it I am! It had this theme in it with the verse “I bet you don't curse God when the doctor calls with a stern voice and the test results and he asks you to come in right away. I bet you don't curse God when you're on the plane in the turbulence and the pouring rain and you're hoping that you'll make it out okay.”

Even there and even with little knowledge we will find people reaching out in some kind of faith to God. In fear there can be some faith even as the disciples turned to Jesus and asked him for help. However God doesn't want us to live like that but to approach tough things with equanimity because we know he is there and his power will keep us even through death.

Why are you so afraid – there is a saviour who is with us. Not fear but faith.

Just to say in case you really do think I'm up to date I was only listening to that song because my son Philip wrote it.

This brings us to question three

3. don't you care?

It is only in the light of all we have said that this question seems absurd. To them on that lake it made sense. The boat was floundering and they were doing all they could but Jesus was asleep. However looked at through the lens of who Jesus is and what he would do for them to ask “don't you care” of God who had become man to die in their place is absurd. Does God who has made us

care about our lives? Does God who died on a cross that we might be forgiven and restored care about us?

Yet often the accusation against God is that he doesn't care – usually on the back of the fact that he hasn't given us what we want be it health or wealth or whatever. Again as we think of those original readers, they may well have been wondering why doesn't Jesus just deal with this Roman emperor? Where is God for those who are in prison? When things are bad and God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want the question comes Jesus don't you care?"

But we see through the whole of the gospel just how much God does care for us and how he has shown that in Jesus. Therefore we can trust him. We can take hold of his hand as we face the problems and issues of tomorrow and we can know that because he is God he is in control.

Who is he? He is Jesus who is God and man and who as God has power and authority over the whole of creation and the whole of our lives. As such he asks us why are you afraid, not in condemnation but in love to encourage us to trust him with the things that worry us. Because of who he is and what he has done we cannot say don't you care because it is so obvious that God does care.