

Today's gospel is one of the most well-known accounts of Jesus' works of power: calming the storm. It is found in slightly differing forms in all three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – but not in John. This is surprising, really, because it is the kind of story that John would have loved to make deep symbolic use of; so it is likely that he did not have access to this particular material. Because the content of the gospels didn't just drop out of the sky entire and whole: they are works of editing, collating and arranging and have many different sources, both oral and written. For about sixty years after Jesus died, stories would have been told about him by story tellers in the marketplaces and squares, as well as – in the beginning, at least – the synagogues. They would have been arranged by theme, to make memorising and reciting them easier: the parables all together in one block, then the miracles, the moral teaching and finally the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus as one single story to be told.

It was only gradually that the evangelists began to write these stories down and combine them with other sources that provided written material on the life and teachings of Jesus. The fact that three of the gospels tell the story of the calming of the storm probably means that the original source was an eye-witness and that there must certainly be some substance behind it. And why not? As C.S. Lewis observed, the miracles of Jesus do not suspend the laws of nature – they only show us how very little we know about them. I do

not wish to ‘explain away’ Jesus multiplying loaves and fishes or walking on the lake – I do not want it ‘explained away’ because I don’t have a problem with it. I not only believe it, I embrace it. I embrace it because I love the poetic radiance of it, its power to enchant – and I want the golden shafts of light from the world of miracle and wonder to break through the clouds and shadows of everyday ordinariness; in fact, it is only in the clouds and shadows that we will ever see the light. It is only within the temporal and the finite that we ever feel the touch of the eternal and the infinite.

Of course Jesus calmed the storm.

And yet there is another way, too, of understanding this story. It is to see it as a spiritual reality within ourselves. Jesus is master of the wind and the sea and, looking at this as a symbol, a visual metaphor, we can say that Jesus calms the emotional and psychological storms within our souls. Water has been a symbol, a visual metaphor of the emotions, for thousands of years – and turbulent waters mean an upsurge of emotions that sometimes almost drown us. A popular hymn in the 80’s has the words:

“Just as you calmed the wind and walked upon the sea, conquer, my living Lord, the storms that threaten me.”

I came across what I think is a really appropriate prayer from the service of the Mennonite Brethren – who were, and still are – a Lutheran sect that began in Prussia but spread as far afield as India and Thailand. It goes like this:

“The worst storms, Jesus, are the ones caused by our fear, when we grow afraid of losing our power, or we grow suspicious of the power of others, when we refuse to acknowledge your mysterious authority. Yet, it is in the storm that we find our capacity to love. In releasing our weak claim to power and opening ourselves to your sovereignty, we discover a new way of seeing ourselves – as called, and as beloved – and our neighbour, whoever they may be, as dignified, precious and loved. Here, in the middle of the storm, Lord, we need you and we need each other, and the love you give us to share. You will lead us through sacrifice and self-giving to peace and calm, if only we will loosen our hold on the tempests of fear.”

Sadly, the Mennonites were persecuted and killed by both the Catholic and Protestant authorities. They number only about 500,000 in the world today.

Yet, as this Mennonite prayer suggests, we have all known moments of anger so great that we were almost beside ourselves, even possessed by it; we have all experienced at some time during our lives the storms of jealousy, envy, sexual desire, fear, anxiety and resentment. It cannot be otherwise, because we are all human beings. This is the nub of it: when Jesus asks the disciples: “Why were you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?” They might well have found themselves saying: ‘Because we’re only human.’

Jesus' implicit invitation not to be afraid but to have faith in him, is a personal one – to the disciples in the boat and to each one of us. Whether it be the outward storms of fear and uncertainty in this world we live in, or the inner tempests of uncontrollable emotions, passions and desires, Jesus is the one who – though he seems to be asleep in the barque of our soul – is in fact Master of all turbulence, outer or inner. St Thérèse of Lisieux said:

“Jésus dormait comme toujours dans ma petite nacelle.”

(‘Jesus was sleeping as always in my little boat.’)

Enduring a long period of spiritual darkness, Thérèse drew upon the image of Jesus asleep in the stern of the boat to help her have courage. It doesn't really matter how we envisage the Lord in our hearts (because that's where he is to be found and only there): whether it be the historical Jesus, or the Beloved, or the icon of God, or the Crucified Lord, the supreme Friend – we will all have our own images to which we relate and that's how it should be, because each of us is unique. I have a friend who, in a time of personal crisis, experienced Christ coming to him in the form of a tiger. The particular form in which the divine Lord enters our heart isn't something that someone else has told us it should be, or what other people expect, or what we're taught the scriptures say: it is ours alone. Every image we have of him is both hopelessly inadequate and totally acceptable. The Lord loves the inadequate because there is more room for him. The Lord is deep within us, nowhere else, and it is the Lord

within us – however we conceive him to be – who commands the storms to cease when they threaten to overwhelm us.