

Lord, Save me! 9th August 2020

1 Kings 19 v 9-18 Psalm 105 v 1-6, 16-22, 45b
Matthew 14 v 22-33

*Through the storms of Life,
O God you are with your people
In the person of Jesus your Son.
Calm our fears and strengthen our faith
That we may never doubt your presence among us
But proclaim he is your Son, risen from the dead living for ever
and ever. Amen.*

Before nautical navigational instruments were invented and ships were out of sight of land, they were in uncertain and sometimes dangerous positions. The metaphorical phrase 'All at sea' describes this discombobulation in people who feel lost or bewildered. In Biblical stories the sea represents chaos, an active power that threatens the goodness of life, which is held at bay by God.

In both our bible stories today we see fear, courage and God's saving power.

The disciples are fearful- all at sea- both literally and metaphorically. It is the first time they have been sent forth without Jesus. There is a storm. Jesus presence is absent. They feel alone...and yet a figure is walking towards them. Peter is afraid and questions if the person walking on water is really Jesus. Jesus replies I AM... "It is I." "I am God here". This reassurance gives Peter courage. Peter leaves the boat to walk on the water. But the story is more complicated than we think. If the meaning of the story is rooted in Matthean community's writings, it is best understood within the context of that Christian community's persecution and fear. The reason why Peter sinks is because he takes his eyes off Jesus and leaves the boat. i.e. the church. Jesus presence is found in community of the faithful. Faith is daring to believe that God is with us in the boat as the community of faith makes its way through the storm. In a sense, Peter is saved from individualism.

The prophet Elijah has had the courage to denounce idolatry and injustice to the rulers of the nation of his day. He claims that he is a lone prophet in a land ruled by the ruthless who want to kill him. He moans to God, like the Israelites in the desert. He is 'all at sea' on dry land! He travels alone to the top of Mount Sinai, just like Moses, and he hides in a cave. The word of God finds him and asks him what he is doing there. Then God speaks to him in a still small voice – but this phrase is actually vague in Hebrew and could mean 'the sound of utter silence'. It is 'the moment when all creation holds its breath before God speaks.' Just as Moses takes off his shoes at the burning bush, for he recognises Holy Ground and is afraid to look on God, so Elijah understands the mysterious silence and hides his face. God speaks to correct Elijah's desire to turn away and do things his own way and sends him back into the thick of it- this time up North! Elijah is saved from his own self-deception by the instructions of God. He is not on his own. God is with him. He is not the new Moses. God has other plans and a different perspective on the people than Elijah does.

What speaks to me from the readings and the picture?

More complex questions are brought to mind - How do I deceive myself and let God correct me? We often think our plans are God's plans... what preconceptions and ideas of the role of the church do we need to be saved from in order to attune ourselves to God's vision?

ⁱ Picture by Sieger Koder Quotes from Trevor Dennis *Lo and Behold The Power of Old Testament Storytelling*. SPCK 1991.



1 Kings 19: 9-18

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

¹¹ He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was

not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Matthew 14: 22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Hymn Reflection – Malcolm Sturgess

We're going to cheat a little bit this week and use the wrong storm. The one in Matthew chapter 14 has St. Peter crying out, "Save me!" In the earlier one, in Matthew chapter 8, all the disciples shout, "Save us, Lord" - and there is a hymn based on that, almost verbatim. This was a favourite amongst my Junior School pupils in Romsey. They sang it like a mini opera. Sheer melodrama! Explain the meaning of "guileless" and then they could understand every word of it. They could learn what a metaphor is while they were enjoying singing one. They could learn musical theory, too: agitated crotchets in the key of C Minor for panic; dotted minims in Eflat Major for "calm and still". Dramatic diminuendos as the wild winds hushed and as the waves ceased to leap. And in the process they absorbed a story from the Bible with relevance to their own lives.

According to a graph on the Internet, from 1875 it took this hymn a long time to find favour, but then in the middle of the last century it was in 156 different hymn books before it suddenly fell from favour again. I did not understand why, so I went straight to one of the Editors of the New A & M to ask him. He said that, when designing the new book, they each prepared lists of about 100 hymns in A & MNS (our red book) which they felt were expendable, and all agreed this one was rarely sung. John admitted it might have some relevance during a coronavirus pandemic! One of its problems is that the tune is too similar to *Rievaulx*, which goes to *Father of heaven, whose love profound*.

Both tunes were written by J.B.Dykes specifically for their respective words. The tune to our hymn is called St. Aelred. Aelred was a writer, an historian, and, paradoxically, from 1147, Abbot of Rievaulx, in Yorkshire! Enjoy; you may never see it again!

Fierce raged the tempest o'er the deep, watch did thine anxious servants keep,
but thou wast wrapped in guileless sleep, calm and still.

"Save, Lord, we perish!" was their cry, "O save us in our agony!"
Thy word above the storm rose high: "Peace, be still"

The wild winds hushed; the angry deep sank, like a little child, to sleep;
the sullen billows ceased to leap, at thy will.

So, when our life is clouded o'er, and storm winds drift us from the shore,
say, lest we sink to rise no more, "Peace, be still".