

READINGS FOR SUNDAY 24th JUNE

Job 38.1–11. 2 Corinthians 6.1–13. Psalm 107.1–3, 23–32. Mark 4.35–41.

SERMON for the DAY by Mark Simms

Fear is a great and powerful thing. It is there to keep us safe, avoiding dangers where possible and practical. It is cautious. It is safer to run from ninety-nine empty bushes than to linger around the one hiding a tiger. Fear is not rational. By the time you had worked out whether there really was a tiger in the bush, the tiger would be halfway through its dinner. Fear is, at heart, a good thing, given by God for our own protection.

The disciples in this morning's gospel story had a very healthy fear of the sea. To this day, the Sea of Galilee is notorious for the violent storms that can arise suddenly, with no warning. The fishermen, among the disciples, would have known of friends and colleagues, who had been drowned after being caught in an unexpected storm. Those who had worked or lived in the towns along the shore would have heard stories about those lost at sea. Many would have attended funerals for people, whose bodies had been washed up on the shore.

So the disciples' reaction to the storm seemed perfectly reasonable. They were scared. Jesus had decided to cross the lake one evening and a storm had blown up. In the violent wind and the crashing waves, their small boats had started to fill with water. It seemed only a matter of time before the boats would sink and they would all drown. They were powerless in the face of the forces of nature. So, quite naturally, they were scared.

All this time Jesus was lying in the back of the boat fast asleep. When the disciples woke him, he commanded the wind and waves to stop. Immediately, the wind stopped and the water was calm. A great stillness fell on the lake, as great as the storm that had been raging a few moments before. This scared the disciples even more than the storm had. Who was this man, this Jesus, who could command the forces of nature by a simple word?

Yet, as Jesus turned to his disciples, he asks them why they were afraid. Why was their vision of God so small that they thought he couldn't cope with a simple thing like a storm? Why did they think that God is so uncaring that he did not consider the needs of every one of them? Did they not understand that the creator and sustainer of all knows about and cares for all his creatures?

The disciples would have known the stories of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. They may have heard today's Old Testament reading from Job. They should have known that God can be trusted, that he cares about each one of us and that he has the power to save us from the greatest danger. They should have believed that he is bigger than all the forces of nature combined.

It is this trust in the face of danger that Paul writes about in our New Testament reading. His mission to spread the good news about Jesus had not been easy. He had been imprisoned and beaten more than once. Mobs had tried to kill him. Yet he still trusted that God would make his mission fruitful. In the end, he knew his life was just one small part of God's plan. Living or dying, he was committed to spreading the message God had given him.

Today, sometimes we are brave in the face of challenges like Paul, but sometimes we let our fears get the better of us like the disciples in the boat. Fear of embarrassment, fear of people who are different from us and fear of the size of problems can get in the way of our trust in God, who is bigger and stronger than anything we have to fear.

With our friends and family, the fear of not fitting in can stop us challenging ideas and attitudes that are not compatible with the love of God we see in Jesus. Our fear of losing friends or falling out with family might draw us into doing things that we know God wouldn't want. Yet God is bigger than all this. His family is one where truth and honesty matter, where justice and peace are treasured. Real friends, who reflect the love we see in Christ, are willing to accept the challenges we bring in his name and to learn and grow through them.

The fear of those, who we don't understand, can separate us from those who are different from us. The homeless, those of different races, religions or social classes, even our children or grandchildren, sometimes seem to be living in different worlds that we know nothing about. Yet God is bigger than all this. Jesus bridged the gap between Jews, Samaritans, Greeks and Romans. When we try to live out the love of God in our life, it can bridge the gaps between all types of people. Simply smiling, saying hello and thank you and being available make a start in bridging gaps.

Many of the great issues of the day seem too big for us to deal with. The environment, war, world poverty and homelessness are problems of such enormity we fear we can do nothing to help. Yet God is bigger than any and all of these. God calls us to work together to speak out against the things that are wrong in society, to campaign for justice for the poor and the vulnerable and to challenge violence and prejudice wherever it occurs. It is when we all live out the values of God's kingdom, trusting in God's power to bring his kingdom about, that we know his kingdom is near.

Fear is not a bad thing. It tells us when things might be dangerous and suggests we take appropriate precautions. Trusting God doesn't mean ignoring our fears. However, faith allows us to approach our fears realistically, knowing that God is bigger than anything we are scared of. Faith does not mean that things will be easy. It does not mean things will be safe. In fact, facing our fears, as Jesus did in Gethsemane, means taking the way of the cross, the way of sacrifice. It is not about avoiding risks, but about taking the right risks for the right reasons.

There is a story in the book of Daniel in the bible about three men called Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. When asked by the Babylonian emperor whether they thought that God could save them from him, they answered that they knew God could save them. However, that was not the point. Whether God would save them or not, they would do what God commanded them, even if that meant suffering the emperor's punishment. They saw the risk, put their trust in God and followed God's way. Go and do likewise.