

Mark 4: 35-41

In the words of our Gospel, “...a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat and the boat was being swamped... the disciples woke Jesus and said to him, Teacher do you not care that we are perishing? Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the sea, Peace! Be still. Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm. He said to them, Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

In our Gospel reading we hear the story of Jesus calming the storm – the story of Jesus calming the nerves of the disciples. This reading reminds us of the power of faith – the faith that we hold onto, when the storm rages around us.

Today, I’m mindful that you’ve had some really good teachings about faith, over the last couple of weeks. Last week, you heard the story of the mustard seed – the seed that falls to the ground and dies in the earth, in order to be reborn. The mustard seed reminds us of the faith that changes us and encourages growth – a faith that we carry forward – through the experience of death and resurrection. Today, in a similar way, the disciples caught in the eye of the storm are asked to make a similar journey – to hold onto a faith that will ultimately carry them through to the other side. (Another story about death and resurrection.)

Imagine, if you can, the fear of the disciples in that small boat – a group of men soaked to the skin, tossed about on a wind-swept sea in the middle of a storm.

The reading talks about a time when the living are given a glimpse of their own mortality – a glimpse of their human frailty. The storm is a place of chaos and change – a place where we look into the abyss – an unknown future. (As Hugh said on Wednesday, the disciples in the boat didn’t know what was going to happen next – they were afraid of the unknown.) So yes, the storm is a place where faith is tested and renewed.

And this is what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about the times of testing that help to shape us – times of change and growth that shape our beliefs and our values. (As with the storm, these can be uncomfortable experiences – but they’re very necessary.) Our reading talks about the times of struggle and doubt that we experience when we feel ourselves starting to sink in deep water.

As I said on Wednesday, change seems to be the one constant in our lives. Yes, after 5 years in this parish it is time for me to move on to a new position. I have loved my time in the parish – I have loved my parishioners and the time we have shared together. This has been a wonderful parish – a peaceful and welcoming parish – a place where we have shared prayer and worship – a place where we have worked to build a vision of community that will hopefully continue to grow and mature, long after I have moved on.

Today we are reminded that change is a leap of faith. Much like the disciples in our reading, today we look out into a largely unknown future. Like the disciples, some of you may even see storm clouds on the horizon. Consider the disciples and their response to the storm. What will we carry with us? I hope we will carry a faith that has the power to strengthen us – faith in a God who loves us and will help us to build a future on the foundations that have already been laid.

How many of you still remember your first day at school – do you remember how you felt? It was a time when you were called to leave behind the familiar and comfortable surroundings of your home – the closeness of parents who loved you – parents who offered reassurance and a sense of safety. The first day of school is the experience of stepping out into an unknown future – a time of change that is permanent. After the first day of school, we can never go back – only forward. It’s frightening for most children (and disorientating). But, it’s also very necessary – if we want to see our children continue to grow – if we want to see them become the people that God calls them to be. And this pattern of ongoing change continues – change and growth – death and resurrection.

Over the last 5 years, I have seen some of you weather some very intense storms. Some of us have lost loved ones – family and friends. Some have struggled with financial concerns – some have struggled with ongoing health issues. And, there have been other concerns.

Like the disciples who find themselves caught in the eye of a terrible storm, we sometimes feel overwhelmed by the unexpected and the unknown – the disturbing and frightening events that build up around us. When the wind blows and the waves threaten our safety, we are called to hold onto our faith – our trust in a loving God. But, sometimes, this is easier said than done.

The heart of our Gospel reminds us of the power of death and resurrection – the power and potential contained within the mustard seed – the power and the potential of the storm.

Like the voice of the Lord that speaks to Job from the whirlwind, or the forces of nature, or the experience of loss and our own human frailty – all of these experiences remind us of our dependence on a greater power, especially in times of difficulty. In times of sickness and loss and grief, the illusion of control can be swept away and we see ourselves as we truly are – fragile creatures who are dependent on the grace of God (the wisdom of God – who can see well beyond our field of vision).

Like the disciples in our reading, we’re reminded that we are not alone. And, we’re reminded that the storm can lead us to a new place – a place of transformation and renewal (resurrection). Much of what we take for granted can be recognised in a new light – after the storm has passed (after the first day of school, or after we have settled in that new job, or in that new house, or after the birth of a child – or after a long illness or any other time of difficulty and struggle). In the storm, many of our wants and desires lose their importance, while others seem to gain greater significance. In some cases, people caught in the storm can see their lives flash before their eyes – in the storm strange things can happen.

In the weeks to come, I pray that we will all be given an opportunity to give thanks for the grace of God, which we have shared over the last 5 years. I pray that we will remember the wisdom of our readings – the faith that we see so beautifully described in the story of the mustard seed and the story of the disciples caught in the storm. And, most importantly, I pray that we will share a faith that can carry us forward – into the rich blessings of God that wait for us in the coming months and years. Today, in our worship and at our AMP, we are called to celebrate the gift of growth and renewal - the opportunities and grace that accompany these times of change and renewal.

The Lord be with you.