

accordingly. Indeed, their first comments; 'who is this, then, that even the wind and the sea obey Him' (4:41) indicate that they had already begun to consider that Jesus was divine and was able to act with divine power. Anyone who could do this was performing feats that only God could do, and this, before their eyes. The words of the Greek text indicate that the awe (4:41) with which they asked this question exhibited a far deeper spiritual 'fear' than the fear of the storm (4:38-40).

Application

It is so easy for us to think of this great story as one which proves Jesus was God because He was able to perform nature miracles. To a certain extent that is and was true, but firstly, this does not impress people today who simply say that the evidence this happened is so weak it is not possible to say it happened, and secondly, it does not do justice to the importance of faith in the story. Mark does not give much direct teaching from Jesus about faith, so we should be careful to study each place where it is mentioned with care.

At one level, this story is a form of testimony. The disciples remembered this event, and they told people about it and it therefore ended up in the Gospel of Mark. The truth of the incident is therefore a matter of what we make of the disciple's testimony. It is easy for a cynic to say that storms easily arise on the Lake and then disappear (as, by all accounts, they do), and Jesus took advantage of the situation to make a call for faith in His leadership and authority. However, the affect of Jesus on the lives of these fishermen was far more than this simple assessment allows for. Fishermen knew the ways of the sea better than a carpenter, and what happened sufficiently scared them and caused them to 'stop and think', that they left the story as we have it. It is short on facts, but the details are all understandable from the point of view of a fisherman, but at the end the emphasis is on faith.

Consequently, the message of this passage for us is a message of faith. All sorts of things happen to each of us, and we have the opportunity to say that our lives are made up of a mixture of natural fact chance and a few decisions (many of them made by people other than us), or say that life is too complex for such mediocre simplicity. God is surely involved in what happens to us, and we are challenged, particularly at times of crises when our lives seem to be at stake, to have faith in God who loves us. We may be on a spiritual journey of faith, but unless we are prepared to learn from the frequently amazing and scary things that happen to us and trust more and more in Christ, then we have not learned the lessons of faith which God is setting out before us.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What reactions do people give to the 'nature miracle' of Jesus today? Do people believe them? If so, why or why not?
2. What does this passage of Scripture tell you about faith?
3. How much of our faith is a gift from God, and how much of it is learned from the experiences of life?

Discipleship

Instead of looking back over your life, consider taking a look at what is happening to you at the moment. At one level, this may appear to be boring; but for most of us there will be a variety of things happening of which some will be entirely straightforward and others will be severely challenging. Think and pray about this, but somewhere within your life at the moment, there will be some matter which the Lord is using to challenge you about your faith. Make sure you know what this is, and do your best to learn from what is happening. This is what true discipleship is about!

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, may we understand your life and work with such clarity, we have no fear of speaking about You or explaining the Gospel of Salvation to others. May we always treat Your Word with respect, and use it with dignity and care, all our lives. AMEN

Prayer

Will you come and help us Lord, even now? Will you forgive us our sins, teach us Your ways, and guide us on the right pathways? Praise be to You, Almighty Lord and God, You hear our prayers, You heal our souls and You lead us into all truth. Praise be to You, Almighty God, for we can depend upon You: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Personal Decisions

Pray today to ask God to help you with the many decisions you make each day, for example,

- To show love and affection
- When to work or stop working
- How to say something helpful
- When to give others attention

Each small decision is part of the life God has given you, and any one of them can be vitally important for someone else. Pray for God's guidance.

Meditation

We all experience moments when love seems far away;

But Jesus, You are closer than the air around us.

We long to know 'why', when the mysteries of life loom large;

But You hold the secrets of the world in Your mind.

We search for all truth, seeming to be so near, and yet so far;

But You are the truth we so earnestly seek to find.

We struggle with our fears, our worries and our temptations;

But You remain constant and Your love never fails.

We attempt to deal with evil when it assails us unexpectedly;

But You have all victory over the all evil, forever.

So bridge the gap, we pray, between our life's experiences

And the glorious truth of Christ and His Kingdom.

And hasten the time when there will be no need for comparison.

Bible Study - Mark 4:35-41

³⁵ That day, when evening had come, He said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.'³⁶ Leaving the crowd behind, they took Him with them in the boat, just as He was; there were other boats with Him as well. ³⁷ A violent squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was already being swamped. ³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, so they woke Him up and said to Him, 'Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?' ³⁹ He stood up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Do you not yet have faith?' ⁴¹ They were filled with great awe and asked each other, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?'

Review

This well known story about Jesus and the disciples is the first 'nature miracle' in Mark's Gospel. Jesus had already healed people and cast out demons, but here, He showed His command of nature, of the wind and the sea. The great Old Testament prophets had also demonstrated God's control of nature; Elijah called on God to bring rain to Israel (1 King 18f.) and Elisha performed an astonishing array of 'nature' miracles, such as purifying a pot of stew

(2 Kings 4:38f.) and floating an axe head (2 Kings 6:1f.). Certainly, if Jesus was to demonstrate that He was the Messiah, then the people of His day would have expected Him to perform miracles showing His control over nature.

This incident is recorded in Matthew (8:23-27) and in Luke (8:22-25) as well as here in Mark, and though the differences between the three versions are interesting, they are relatively insignificant, and the story has much more to say than illustrate Jesus' ability to do miracles and control nature. It is the first place in Mark where Jesus comments on the faith of the disciples, and the only previous mention of faith in the Gospel was Jesus' comment about the faith of the people who brought the paralysed man to Him (2:5). It is highly likely that the early church used this passage as teaching story of Jesus about faith, illustrating the faith required of a disciple of Christ; hence its use in all three Gospels. The story is still used like this in many a sermon today.

The background to the incident is important. Jesus decided to cross the Sea of Galilee after a day's teaching (4:35); it was a sudden decision, illustrated by Mark's comment that the disciples took Jesus 'just as He was' (4:36). Today, we have to remember that people of those days saw special significance in the sea and the storm. Today, we regard a storm at sea as a mere fact of life, and think that in this story, it merely represents the facts of life outside human control. To the disciples and others of that day, however, the sea was a place of danger that illustrated the abiding presence of evil in the world, as evidenced by the extreme risks of a storm at sea. They were not afraid to use the sea, but they were highly cautious of its perils.

After a taxing day, Jesus took up the only position in the boat in which it was possible to sleep, resting on the leather seat in the stern of the boat normally used by the helmsman. As we read about the mounting catastrophe surrounding Jesus and the disciples, we are reminded of the many other Scriptures in which a storm is a metaphor for the struggles of life, especially when people feel that God has turned His back on them (Psalms 35:23, 44:23f., 59:4, Isaiah 51:9a etc.) and they suffer a crisis of faith. As their predicament in the storm became impossible, the disciples woke Jesus; they feared that the storm might claim their lives, but Jesus responded to their plight and immediately calmed the raging seas with an authoritative command. His comment, 'why are you afraid, do you not yet have faith?' (4:40) challenged the disciples to add to what they had already learned about faith, and trust Him in the most extreme circumstances of life. Jesus was calling the disciples to live not by the evidence of what was happening around them, but according to the truths about God they had begun to see in Jesus. Their Lord was no mere miracle worker, but acted with the authority of God, and to believe this was a great challenge to their faith!

The disciples were amazed at what happened. The experience of the storm was tough even though they trusted Jesus; their faith had been stretched far more than they could have expected, and they were filled with 'awe' (4:41) that the power of God was so obviously present in Jesus. We may think we have sufficient 'faith', but we should beware lest our Lord ask of us more than we imagine!

Going Deeper

There is so much more to this story. The elements of the sea and the storm do indeed have their significance, and there are small changes to the text which make Mark's story different from the other Gospels. This means that we must look further at these things and the words Jesus spoke in order to find out more about the qualities of faith taught by this story.

The divine power to act

In a quite dramatic way, this story asserts the power and authority of Jesus as God Himself. Jesus does not go around saying 'I am God' in Mark's Gospel, as if this would enable people have faith in Him. What He did was to do things which demonstrated this fact by touching in to some of the deep seated beliefs of the people of the day. We can easily find a message within this story about faith in Jesus because clearly, He asked for it (4:40), but faith is far more subtle than that.

Ancient peoples believed that the world was created after an epic battle between God and forces of evil in the sea, and it was a battle which God won. Whilst this theme of creation is found in many ancient civilisations, it is partly reflected in the Bible's story of creation, where it

says in Genesis; 'darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind (spirit) from God swept over the face of the waters' (Gen 1:2, and see also Psalms 89:8,9, 106:8,9 etc). This is a picture of God victoriously in control of the world by the power of the Spirit, and it is a picture of a pacified ocean. What Jesus did on this occasion was to do something which was extremely close to the mental picture of the disciples (and everyone else in those days) about God's control and creation of the world. Jesus could hardly have found a more eloquent way of saying 'I am God'; but it was not words which counted, but deeds.

In addition, and following on from this theme, a storm was regarded as a powerful demonstration of evil, partly because the wind and the storm unsettled the calm order of God's control, and partly because storms at sea cost lives. There is a great and well known psalm which speaks of special thanksgiving given to God after safe travel, especially travel by sea; Psalm 107; 'some went down to the sea in ships ... they saw the deeds of the Lord ... he raised the stormy wind ... their courage melted away in their calamity ... they cried out to the Lord ... and He made the storm be still ... let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love!' (Psalm 107:23-31). Now, you will immediately see the connection between this psalm and our story! One small feature of what Mark says is found in verse 36, where it says 'there were other boats with Him as well', and although this is not in Matthew or Luke's version of the story, some believe that this small insight into what was going on helps make a link between Jesus' stilling of the storm and Psalm 107, in which it specifically says 'ships' (v23), meaning more than one boat!

We should not disregard, however, the symbolic importance of the storm as representing the force of evil in rebellion against God. Throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel complained that God was not available when needed to help His people in distress; that is, when the 'storms of life' were at their height. Many Psalms have exactly this as their theme (Psalm 13, 69, 102 etc.). Jesus rebuked the wind and the sea, says Mark, and these words are ones which indicate that Jesus thought He was facing evil forces. Even His words 'peace, be still', are words which we know were used in Jesus' day for the casting out of demons.

The paradox of the story is that Jesus was asleep, yet in control of events; and that is a key characteristic of the life of faith. The man or woman of faith must maintain confidence that despite everything, God is in control and will not allow anything to happen which will prevent their salvation (Isaiah 43:2, Psalm 46:1-3, 65:5)

Salvation and faith.

The truth is that Jesus Himself demonstrated the characteristics of faith that He was asking the disciples to learn from Him. In their spiritual journey so far, the disciples had expressed faith by following Jesus when called (1:16-20 and 2:13), but faith was only asked of them in the straightforward sense of following Him in the midst of what happened, the incident in the cornfields, for example (2:23f.). A new angle on faith was opened when Jesus began to teach the disciples, and made clear to them that even if they did not fully understand the secret of the Kingdom of God (4:11), they were the ones Jesus intended to teach and reveal the secret to, as they gradually began to understand the spiritual meaning of the parables (e.g. 4:21-25).

Now, in this famous incident of the calming of the storms, Jesus did two important new things which built up their faith. Firstly, through all the connections we have noted above, Jesus was clearly asking His disciples to have as much faith in Him as the Old Testament people of God had faith in the God of their fathers! But Jesus asked more faith of the disciples than that, and also gave them more reason to have that faith. Jesus asked the disciples 'why are you afraid?' In other words, Jesus said to His disciples that unlike the people of the Old Testament, they did not have to be afraid because of the presence of evil around them (represented by the storms), and the reason He said this was because Jesus was with the disciples in a way that God was never personally with His people. Jesus had come from heaven into this world precisely so that this assurance could be given.

The next sentence of what Jesus said has been translated 'do you not yet have faith?' but you will find that some versions of the Bible have 'do you have no faith?' as if Jesus were chiding the disciples. This is helpful, for the disciples were on a path of learning, and Jesus did not, I believe, chide them unnecessarily. They showed faith according to the situations they had faced and were learning about it at each situation they were presented with by Jesus. Here, Jesus' comment asks the disciples to work out what was happening to them and respond