

## **The Stilling of the Storm – Bishop Richard Harries**

**24<sup>th</sup> February 2019 - 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday before Lent, St Mary's, Barnes**

On the face of it today's Gospel seems a simple enough story. Those who have been to the Holy Land on pilgrimage will perhaps have been told that the Lake of Galilee, though, thank goodness, still beautiful and unspoilt, is prone to sudden dangerous squalls. Sometimes tourists cannot go out on it. It is easy to imagine the disciples in a small boat with a sudden storm blowing up and swamping it with water. Panicking they wake up Jesus. In the version in Mark, which has a number of small details as though it came from an eye-witness, we read in the authorised version "And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea "Peace be still." And the wind ceased and there was a great calm." The disciples were then chided for their lack of faith, and they wondered that even the elements seemed to obey him.

A simple story which aroused awe and wonder. But almost from the first this had deeper resonances, was understood as more than a simple act of remembrance. Mark's version is the basis of the account in Luke and Matthew but some tiny details in those later versions seem to indicate that by then, when the church had begun to experience persecution, they saw it as directly applicable to their contemporary situation. The ship of salvation, the church, was indeed being tossed about by raging forces and God seemed asleep- but no, the story says, Christ the Lord of all was with them and they should have faith.

According to those who heard it one of the most powerful sermons that came out of World War II was preached on this incident by Martin Niemoller. He was a U boat commander in the first world war who won an Iron Cross first class. Initially sympathetic to Hitler, a

fact that he later deeply regretted, he eventually saw the reality, opposed him and was imprisoned for 8 years. When he began to realise what was happening, he too preached on this story with the same theme. In all these storms of violence and persecution Christ the Lord of all was with them still and they were not to be faithless.

Peace be still..and there was a great calm

Today there seems to be quite a hunger for peace of mind. Mindfulness for example has been taken up in schools and the NHS as being of proven value, as I am sure it can be. But however helpful techniques of breathing and stilling body and mind can be, including as a preparation for contemplative prayer, it is not in itself prayer. Not in itself, that peace which Christ promised his followers. “Peace I leave with you”, he said, “my peace I give unto you. Not as the world gives, give I unto you.”

Life does not allow us to be totally anxiety free. If someone you love is ill, you worry about it. How could you not, for you care for them.

The world as we know it does not allow us to be unaffected. It is now, and always has been, a turbulent, violent place. The only way we could be unaffected would be to shut it out, turn off the TV and radio, never look at a paper or smart phone. Make ourselves immune, dead to all feeling. But that approach would be to sell our birthright. To be human is to be open to at least some of the anguish of the world.

If we are concerned about justice in an unjust world, we will be even less likely to live a trouble free life. When Martin Luther King was in prison because of his campaign for civil rights some white pastors wrote to him and told him to stop causing trouble. As he wrote back “Peace is not the absence of tension but the presence of Justice”. To draw people’s attention to the truth, to try to change things in the direction of a fairer world brings opposition. But the biblical concept of peace, of Shalom, is as Martin Luther King said, the presence of

justice. The Bible as often as not speaks of a false peace, of those who cry “peace, peace” when there is no true peace, of those who just want to be left in peace.

The Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland which is dedicated to reconciliation has a fine prayer which gets it right.

Show us, good Lord,  
The peace we should seek,  
The peace we must give,  
The peace we can keep,  
The peace we must forego,  
And the peace you have given  
In Jesus Christ our Lord.

So there is a peace to be had, the peace Christ has given us  
Wordsworth wrote of a “Central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation”. T.S.Eliot put it even better in his phrase “The still point of the turning world”. At a time of great personal distress in his life he found that peace in the Christian faith and wrote about it in his poem “Ash Wednesday”.

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood  
Teach us to care and not to care  
Teach us to sit still,  
Even among these rocks  
Our peace in His will

Even among these rocks our peace in His will. This is not a condition that can be achieved by any technique. It is not primarily about the emotions, or a psychological state at all. Yet it would be surprising if it did not have some effect on our feelings and emotional state. It would be surprising if it did not make us calmer, better able to cope with the storms of life. But at its heart is the daily drawing of our existence from the one who moment by moment holds us in being, living in the presence of the one who is always present with us, seeking of his good purpose in things large and small.

Even among these rocks our peace in his will.