

# *A River Through The Desert*

## *Week 4 The Sea*

### **1 Reflection**



*The Sea of Galilee from the northern shore*

The Sea of Galilee has a special place in the faith and heart of every Christian. So many of us grew up on the stories of Jesus and all that he did on and around the Sea of Galilee. It feels like a familiar place to us even before we have actually visited it in person so, when we do make our pilgrimage to the Holy Land, there can be a sense of feeling as if we have arrived in our spiritual home when we get to Galilee. The Sea is a place of great beauty: a large expanse of (usually) blue water and circled by high hills on all sides which afford spectacular views across the sea's length and breadth.

Actually 'sea' is a misnomer because it contains freshwater, rather than saltwater, and it is considerably smaller than other seas. The origin for this anomaly is because the Hebrew word for sea (yam) can be used interchangeably with lake; it makes no distinction. Nevertheless, like any other sea it is certainly subject to difficult weather conditions, so it is no surprise that the disciples could become terrified in a storm while out on the sea in a boat. But the most usual experience for pilgrims and other visitors is of an attractive expanse of water which when either walking beside it, or sailing on it, conveys a sense of peace and beauty.

When contemplating the Sea of Galilee, there are so many events in Jesus's ministry on which one could focus. The calling of the first disciples (Mark 1:16-18) took place on the shoreline as the Lord saw Simon Peter and Andrew busy in their work, fishing. He invited them to leave their nets and follow him. There is the time when Jesus amazingly calmed the storm when the disciples feared for their lives. Jesus's ministry comes to a conclusion by the sea too, (John 21:4-14) when following his resurrection, Christ



*The Sea from Kibbutz Ginnosar*

appears to the disciples as they are fishing on the sea and cooks them up a breakfast of bread and fish. This is the moment at which Jesus commissions Peter as the rock upon which the Church would be built.

Several events in Jesus's ministry around the sea are commemorated by churches built on the shoreline which are favourite stopping points for pilgrims. But in my view, there is nothing

better than finding a quiet spot to sit by oneself and meditating on the biblical stories and the call of Christ upon your own life.



The Sea of Galilee from the Mount of Beatitudes

Even if we do not all have the chance to spend time in this place of natural beauty and spiritual significance, many people will have favourite places to walk or to visit in which the presence of God readily becomes real. During the pandemic many people re-discovered the joy of walking and enjoying God's creation. Perhaps the sea, a lake or a river can draw us into the presence of God in a special way. It was by the Sea of Galilee that Jesus called the disciples away from their occupation as

fishermen to a vocation of living and proclaiming God's redeeming love. They were receptive to the voice of God in that moment.

However, the enrichment we can receive from time spent contemplating by the Sea of Galilee is rather a contrast to how people of Jesus's time felt and thought about the sea. Jews back then, and even today, would typically refer to themselves as 'people of the Land'. The Land was promised to Moses and when eventually they crossed the Jordan, they took possession of the Land. They saw their occupation of Judea and Samaria as a sign of God's blessing. However, the sea, whether that be the large inland water expanses,



*The Mediterranean Sea at Jaffa*

or the Mediterranean Sea, was viewed with suspicion and fear. The Philistines were the "Sea People" and the sea was associated with chaos, danger and fearful sea monsters who lived in the deeps.

For this reason, the story of Jesus's calming of the storm has even more significance than we tend to understand in our own reading of the text.

"The disciples went and woke Jesus saying, 'Lord, we are perishing'. And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?'" (Matthew 8:23-27).

Meanwhile, Jesus had been peacefully sleeping in the back of the boat. Of course, we know exactly what Jesus did to save the day. We are not surprised that the disciples were frightened and we can identify with their panic.

This is a reminder to us in all situations, not only if we are in a storm in a boat, but at all times, to trust in God who can help us to overcome paralysing fear and to do what needs to be done. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally, reflecting on the isolating and frightening experience of a lockdown confining so many to their homes, suggested that we all should focus on God rather on the virus, to find some solace. For, in the

story of the storm calming, Jesus told the disciples to focus on him rather than on the storm. The disciples saw that Jesus had power over the elements, everything became peaceful again and they were reassured. Jesus, the Saviour of the world, was more powerful than the forces of the abyss of which they were so afraid.

Looking out across the gentle stillness of the Sea of Galilee we might just be able to sense the peace which can be ours through faith. Inevitably there will be times when we are fearful and we cannot expect God simply to work magic to protect us from all dangers. But our faith in the goodness and the power of God can give to us a peace which passes all understanding. You may well have your own sense of danger lurking around the corner in the midst of your situation right now, just as people of Jesus' time believed there were fearful monsters inhabiting the depths of the abyss. Nearer to home, any one of us can find a place, on the shore of a lake or walking along a beach and find that same sense of equilibrium which comes from the confidence of faith in the God who is strong to save.

The beautiful nineteenth century hymn, written by Horatio Bonar beautifully captures that hope which I glimpse every time I am walking beside the Sea of Galilee.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
"I am this dark world's light;  
Look unto me, your morn shall rise,  
And all your days be bright."  
I looked to Jesus, and I found  
In him my star, my sun;  
And in that light of life I'll walk  
Till trav'ling days are done.



*Sunrise over the Sea of Galilee*

**2** Watch the film at <https://youtu.be/mgTU1dburBI> on YouTube

**3** Read the text: **Matthew 8:23-27**

#### 4 Questions

- 1 Spend time recalling when you have been beside the Sea of Galilee or another body of water that is special to you. What do you recall of your experience of God in that place? Does this memory speak into your present situation or experience? What grace is offered to you today through this process of memory?
- 2 In the gospels fear is such a common reaction of the disciples. Do you connect with their reactions of fear? Reflect on your own reactions of fear. What do you notice in your body? Are there any patterns in your responses? What is God like in the place of your fear? What does God say to you through these and other gospel stories?
- 3 The gospel accounts of Jesus's Calming of the Storm encourage us to look at Jesus rather than the source of our fear or our distress. Can you recall a time when you have done this? Share this experience with others (if you can) and what you discovered about yourself and God.
- 4 What hymns or pieces of music help to calm you when you are unsettled or worried?

You might like to spend some time in prayer.

You might like to reflect further on this session and write down anything you want to hold on to.

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