

Some reflections on the readings for the Second Sunday before Lent.

Having focused over the past few Sundays on our call to Christian discipleship and living, on this Second Sunday before Lent the theme changes dramatically to the theme of creation and its power, and God's control over it. The images of nature are also used symbolically to describe things beyond our control, our sufferings, fears and troubles, but with the comforting message that Jesus has power over them, and we should place our faith and trust in him when life becomes difficult. The early Church often thought of herself as a boat tossed about by turbulent and threatening waters. The New Testament writers in various ways sought to show that with Jesus Christ present and in control, there was no need for fear.

Genesis 2: 4b – 9 & 15 – 25

This is part of the second of the two Genesis creation myths although it is very much the older of the two accounts with different sources to the seven-day creation story of chapter 1. The story is set in Eden, not the name of a known place but a name which means 'garden of delight' or 'paradise.'

There is much for the Bible student to dissect in the different elements of this story. It is brilliantly written to provide an imaginative symbolic pattern of the underlying causes of God's activity in creation and redemption. To try and take the story literally as many have done throughout history is to fail to grasp the skilful art of poetry, metaphor and symbol as a means of conveying the divine purpose, an art which runs in varying degrees throughout the Bible. There are some things, especially when relating to the power and presence of the divine, that can only be expressed in this way, as no other language is adequate or available. Here we have an ancient insight into the divine creative activity. Human beings are created to show what God is like, but they are something less than God – flesh, with all its possibilities of knowledge, desire and choice, able to reveal Godlike qualities but also prone to failure and error.

Psalm 65

The Psalmist gives thanks to God for the call to live in the temple, the house of God, then sings praise for God's cosmic control of the mythical forces of nature (which were once worshipped), followed by praise for the beauty and freshness of the Judaeen springtime.

Revelation 4

Just as the first book of the Bible is full of symbolism and myth, so also the final book, which depicts an apocalyptic vision. Apocalyptic literature, which became popular among the Jews from around 200BC, was not meant to be read as predictions of doomsday and the end of all things. The word means 'unveiling,' hence the name of this Christianised apocalypse, the Book of *Revelation*. Using an abundance of cosmic and coded language it held the promise of something new and better to come. It encouraged Christians suffering persecution to be patient and faithful, giving hope that their present tribulations would soon be replaced by a glorious future, and in this life. Revelation, although difficult to understand from our perspective today, does provide an emotional expression of Christian faith and hope, and contains plentiful material that has aided Christian worship from the beginning.

In this chapter, the writer in his vision is afforded a glimpse, even an experience, of the heavenly throne room. He finds the great biblical themes of creation and redemption being expressed through the worship of heaven. The focus on creation links this passage with the other readings today.

In a world in which the emperor, Caesar, was treated as a god and saviour of the world, there is a triumphant note here which appears throughout the New Testament. It is Jesus, the 'Lamb' (who was slain by Caesar's empire), who now shares the divine throne and power over the world. It is he who is Lord, not Caesar.

Luke 8: 22 – 25

Luke here is repeating Mark's story of Jesus stilling a storm on the Sea of Galilee and calming the fears of his disciples. Whatever the historical basis of this story, we are no doubt once again into the language of metaphor and symbol with the purpose of providing encouragement to a much wider audience. These so-called 'nature miracles' of Jesus have a meaning beyond the limits of the story as read, just as with the parables that Jesus told.

In Hebrew thought, the sea was a symbol of power and fear, often associated with evil. But God was shown as having power over it (see, for example, the Exodus story of the parting of the sea to provide safe passage for the Israelites, or Psalm 107). If we read this Gospel passage symbolically or metaphorically, its meaning becomes clear. Just as Jesus calmed the fears and troubled hearts of the disciples after he 'slept' in death following his crucifixion, so he comes to his followers in this and every generation whenever we are in 'trouble, sorrow, need, sickness or any other adversity.' (Book of Common Prayer intercession). His presence and power are greater than all the difficulties we face. This is surely the message the Gospel writer wants us to receive. It is a story of encouragement that appeals for us to have faith in the Christ who can still the storms and troubled waters of our lives and calm our fears.

A prayer for this Sunday:

God of power and might, when we cry out to you in the storms of life, reassure us that you care and that you are with us. May our faith remain steadfast, calm and peaceful, and deepen through every trial. May we never doubt your presence in whatever challenges we face. Keep us believing and trusting that the waves obey you and that at your command the powers of evil cannot harm us. Stay with us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.