

A boat trip on the Sea of Galilee is one of the highlights of a visit to the Holy Land. There is the rugged beauty of the hills and mountains all around and the mostly silent peace of the lake itself, which forms a huge opening in an otherwise narrow river Jordan. It is effectively an inland sea, hence its name. In a region of political turbulence and frequent hostility, the Sea of Galilee provides a haven of calm. The land has changed greatly over 2,000 years, but out there on the lake, what you see is exactly what Jesus and his disciples would have seen on their own boat journeys. And maybe, if you are lucky, or unlucky, you can have a taste of what we have just read about in the Gospel.

After relating a few parables about the kingdom of God, we read that Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee with his disciples. On the way we have an account of the first of the so-called 'nature miracles' of Jesus. A storm suddenly erupts, and the disciples are frightened, but Jesus remains asleep. Having crossed the Sea of Galilee by boat on three occasions, I can certainly attest to the speed in which a squall or storm can arise out there. It happened on my second trip. The storm appeared to come from nowhere. Most of the people on our boat got a thorough soaking as well as being quite scared. But the storm subsided as quickly as it came. Like the captain of our robust vessel, did Jesus simply understand that the storm was normal and would be brief, and so was able to reassure the disciples. As there were fisherman among them who knew the lake and its habits well, their fear seems rather surprising.

With this story, it would be useful to note a further incident two chapters later, when the disciples were again in a boat on the lake and struggling with the weather once again (6: 45 – 52). We read that having been delayed, Jesus walked over the water to catch up with his disciples in the boat and on his arrival the wind drops, and calm is restored. Is there more going on in both stories than remarkable accounts of the human Jesus demonstrating power over nature?

If the parables of Jesus are not about factual events but nevertheless provide truth and meaning, perhaps we can also understand these nature miracle stories to be something more or deeper than what appears on the surface. Or, to put it another way, whatever you may believe actually happened, what do these stories mean?

In the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, the sea is a symbol of power and fear. It is sometimes associated with evil; it is the place of monsters, and it could be destructive. But God is shown as having power over the sea. Our first reading (Job 38: 1 – 11) and Psalm (verses from 107) today provide clear examples of that conviction. The most memorable example perhaps is the Exodus story which tells of God parting the sea so that the fleeing Israelites can pass through safely. Then God immediately sends the waters back to engulf the pursuing Egyptian army.

If we read Mark's two accounts as metaphorical rather than purely literal, their meaning becomes clearer. There are overtones of the Easter experience, which always hugely influences how the Gospel writers present the historical Jesus. The disciples were in fear when Jesus, so to speak, 'slept' in death following his crucifixion. The 'ship' of the earliest Christian community was tossed about on the 'waves' of fear and discouragement, and faced with the threat of those who wished it harm. Those waves were stilled when Jesus awoke from the sleep of death and appeared to the disciples. His first message was 'peace be with you.' The disciples' fear was replaced by the calm reassurance of his presence. Their courage returned.

For all of us, today's Gospel story outlines how Christ, the risen Lord, comes to us in our hour of need, our darkness, our fear. He calms the storms and troubled waters of our lives. He enables us to walk with him through those storms and on those waters. This is surely the message of hope that Mark is trying to convey to his readers, including us.

Our readings today, then, are essentially about storms, challenges, opposition confronting the people of God. Sometimes the storm or the problem is the result of our own selfishness or short-sightedness, which is what Paul is getting at in our second reading (2 Corinthians 5: 6 – 17), appealing to the Corinthians not to let God's grace within them come to nothing. But when the storm strikes, in whatever form it comes, some hardship or suffering, or some problem afflicting the unity of the Church, it does not mean that God has abandoned us. In fact, God might well be teaching us something new through the experience, and seeking to rescue us through it, leading us to a more grounded level of faith and hope.

Wherever there is trial and tribulation in our lives, whether personally or together as community, and wherever there is disunity and lack of love among us or towards others, let our response be to awaken the Christ who is so close to us, who is in the same boat with us. If we are Christians, he now lives in our lives, in our very selves. So may we too wake up and recognize his presence and embrace the difference that he has come to make to our lives and all our situations. In turning to him we will find him working for our good and seeking to calm our fears. Trusting in him, we too come to share in the miracle of the Sea of Galilee.