

PENTECOST 4 YEAR B / 24TH JUNE 2012 / EAGLEHAWK 10 AM

I really admire people who are the opposite of “control freaks”. By that I mean people who can have all sorts of things chaotically happening around them and don’t seem to be bothered one whit. I suspect they make really great grandparents. There is something in most of us however which does not like things happening around us in a chaotic way: in a way which is not only unexpected but completely beyond our control. No doubt, the people of Moe and surrounding districts felt something of that this week during the earthquake. Seismologists do not seem to be able to predict with any degree of accuracy an imminent earthquake. They are able to say that certain areas are prone to such events, and that perhaps an area is due for one. I wouldn’t like to be living in San Francisco for just that reason: the seismologists are suggesting that another major earthquake is due there sometime. If we can, we try to avoid those things in our existence which bring chaos and a lack of order and control to our lives.

The classic symbol for that chaos in the Hebrew mind was the sea. The very first verse of the bible has that idea at its base. You may remember the verse talks about a dark, brooding mass of water over which the ruach, the spirit hovered. Just read the psalms and you will see that the seas are always seen as threatening, with potential to do harm to God’s people. That is why there is that seemingly odd verse in the last book of the bible, Revelation.

(read Revelation 21:1)

For people who love the ocean and the beach, that’s not much of a comforting thought: “What, no more sea!?” But for a Hebrew mind, it certainly was. That is why the picture of the Hebrew people having to move through parted waters in the Exodus was so powerful: that their liberation was seen even in Jahweh controlling that most threatening of chaotic substances: the sea. So when Jesus calms a storm in a Jewish setting it is not a mere show of brute power on his part over nature: it is a redemptive act in which the chaotic forces which might threaten the lives of his people are brought to heel.

It is not without significance that Mark has made the sea the physical context for the stories contained in what we now know as chapter 4 of his book. The chapters contains all those seeds parables as teaching vehicles about the kingdom. And where are they as they listen to them.

(read Mark 4:1)

And then you read the last verse of the chapter.

(read Mark 4:41)

In other words Mark has located these parables about the power and quiet certainty of the kingdom’s growth in our world – symbolized in the gentle explosion of force in the germination of a seed and the growth of a tree (they can split granite once established in a crack) – .. he has located them right in the context of that place of chaos and the forces that threaten God’s purposes. And he ends the series with this story in which that force is seen to be subject to the one with them in the boat.

Good Methodists will know the story of John and Charles Wesley on their sea trip from England to Georgia where they intended to preach to the American Indians. During the journey a storm came up suddenly and snapped the main mast of the ship. While the Englishmen were crying out in fear a group of Moravian missionaries from what we now know as Czechoslovakia calmly sang hymns and prayed together. That greatly impressed Wesley who later wrote in his journal: “It was then that I realized that mine was a dry land, fair weather faith.” Which is another way of saying that it is easy enough to trust when things are nicely ordered and controlled. It is quite another thing to be trusting when the opposite is your experience.

Probably all of us have been asked the question at some point in our lives, sometimes as a dare by another: “What are you afraid of?” It is the question Jesus addresses to the disciples after stilling the storm. The Greek word for fear is φῆβος and that is the word used in Jesus’ question.

It would seem that the human species has an endless capacity to fear things. There is a myriad of clinically diagnosed fears that doctors and psychiatrists have uncovered. Those conditions all end

with the same Greek word which we now pronounce “phobia”. Let me just read you the list of those that begin with the letter “A” in English.

- Ablutophobia - fear of bathing, washing, or cleaning (some of our kids had that when they were young)
- Achluophobia— fear of darkness
- Acrophobia—fear of heights
- Agoraphobia - Fear of open spaces or of being in public places.
- Agraphobia — fear of sexual abuse.
- Agrizoophobia - fear of wild animals
- Agyrophobia —fear of crossing the road.
- Aichmophobia —fear of sharp or pointed objects (such as a needle or knife)
- Ailurophobia—fear of cats
- Androphobia —fear of men
- Anthophobia — fear of flowers
- Anthronophobia — fear of people or the company of people.
- Aquaphobia — fear of water.
- Arachnophobia - fear of spiders
- Astraphobia — fear of thunder and lightning
- Atychiphobia—fear of failure
- Autophobia — fear of being alone or isolated
- Aviophobia, — fear of flying

And they are just those beginning with the letter “A”!

It would seem that we are rarely aware of how significant a role fear plays in our lives. Perhaps an argument between a husband and wife about whether they should spend money to take an overseas trip is seen as just an argument about an overseas trips. Except it’s probably not just about taking the trip but rather relates to a fear whether there will be enough to pay the bills when the trip is over. Or think of those often heated conversations between parents and teenagers about how late they should stay out with the family car. It may seem like it is about the car but what’s actually behind the conversation again is fear: the teenager’s fear of missing out, of being left behind by some peers who will definitely be out to all hours, and the parents fear about the sorts of things their imagination brings up about what could harm their beloved child. The conversation rages around all sorts of rationalizations as to why the protagonists have right on their side while the actual cause of the argument – the fears lying deeper – go unrecognized and unacknowledged. Put another way, fear lurks just under the surface of a lot of difficult moments in our lives.

Having said that, have you ever thought the question posed of the disciples after the storm has been stilled was just a bit tough. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Blimey, they’d just experienced an awful storm which was in fact threatening to sink the boat: of course they are going to be afraid. After all, some of them are fishermen and they knew this sea of Galilee and its treacherous nature. Yet these words of Jesus link fear with a lack of faith. Let me put the issue back into the context of the symbolic role of the sea in the Hebrew mind. It is the place of the forces of chaos opposed to God. In that particular culture, it was also seen as the abode of the demonic. You may recall the swine herd in the story of the Gerasene demoniac, once the evil spirits have been cast out of the man and into the pigs...where do they run to? They plunge over a cliff into the sea. In that cultural context the demonic spirits are heading home.

Perhaps, in the light of this Jesus does not criticize them for fearing the storm as such. Could it be that he faults them for not trusting his presence with them in the face of those forces? That their fear said something about who they really saw as ruling the world. And that is why their question at the end of the passage is significant: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” They hadn’t yet seen what Jesus was trying to teach them about the presence of God in our world and in particular in him.

Now some of us may be running off with the idea that what Jesus was on about was that they hadn't got their theology about him right: they needed a better Christology, that he was God incarnate. There is a connection between fear and a lack of faith, but it is not that sort of faith. That sort of faith is belief in certain beliefs; it is cognitive. I think the element of faith which has been sorely neglected in favour of cognitive faith is that of trust. It is trust which allows one to live with a free spirit and which motivates one to action. You would only let people you trust watch your kids when they are little. You would never get a night away from a young family without it. You would only go on a long trip around Australia in your 4 wheel drive and caravan if you had a trust in your rig to get you there. If you lose trust in your employer, you find it hard to give all you've got to your work. Faith is trust and that form of faith brings liberty and motivation.

I was talking with someone this week who had had surgery on their eye. It went horribly wrong and they were left blind in the eye on which the surgery had been performed. They said that for two weeks they could not see out of either eye and were in darkness, feeling their way around hospital. It sounded awful, but this person went on to say that they now cherish those two weeks. They learned to trust the Lord again in a new way during that time of darkness and they were giving thanks to God for the experience. That person could easily have let fear about their condition and their future become their experience.

Fear paralyzes. It makes trusting – and the confidence and motivation that comes from trusting – virtually impossible. So maybe the issue isn't that the disciples are understandably afraid because of the storm. Perhaps it was that they had allowed their fear to overtake them. You notice they don't come to Jesus with their concern as such: "Teacher, we need your help in this situation." They come already assuming the worst. What are their words: "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?" That is a fear-induced accusation. Trust has gone - replaced by fear.

Let me try and put the story back into its wider context in this chapter in Mark. Each of us is trying to live by the seed parables' message – that message of the presence of the kingdom working its way out in our world. Yet we are doing that in the midst of an unpredictable, and in some measure, chaotic world. We attempt to order our lives, as well we should, but we know that we do so precariously. We systematically maintain our cars and drive safely on the roads yet we know that no matter how much precaution we take, there are drunk and drug-crazed drivers out there who careen along our roads. Cancers decide that they have had enough of remission and want to return. Superannuation funds which seemed so secure and solid dissipate before our eyes. Even earthquakes moving the very earth on which we walk are possibilities. Is it any wonder that those ads. for insurance for accidental death, for funeral bonds, for all those things that can come upon us without warning... is it any wonder they make easy meat of us on our TVs. Add to that the tenor of our news which is a catalogues of disasters: countries going broke, people losing jobs, spiteful relationships between groups and individuals.

We need constantly to remind ourselves that Jesus is in the boat. This is a good universe. There are beautiful and good purposes running through its life which will never be overcome by all those things which may touch us and our loved ones. That is the message of the seed parables: the life of God has been planted in our midst never to leave. That life will bring about its true end. Rest in that reality as Jesus did in the prow of the boat. May we learn to live with that same trust and find our peace whatever storms may come our way.