

Sermon Archive 490

Sunday 23 June, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Readings: Psalm 107: 1-3, 23-32

Mark 4: 35-41

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



This is a sermon of two sailings - the psalmist's sailing ("some went down to the sea in ships") and the Saviour's sailing (at evening, the twelve go across to the other side). Setting sail for both. Fear for life for both. For both, the structure of the storm. For both, the resolution - and a song of God. And then a short reflection on the storms on **our** journey.

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The Psalmist's Sailing - we're setting sail

We're going out onto the water to do business. From East and West, from North and South, these are the trade routes, the moving of goods - the passage from this language to that culture - with currency exchange and diversity abounding. Spices from afar, fine cloth and minerals. It might be simpler to stay at home; but for those who are swash-buckling, intrepid, ambitious (or who never liked it at home), we're out there on the ocean. And boy, from the ocean we've seen wondrous work - the flying fish, the great whales and giant squids; the fingers of sunset stretching up even as it falls below the horizon. And then those weird wonders that some people hear - the singing of the sirens (beautiful and dangerous, sad, sexy and mysterious). And there's **humanity's** work as well - the lighthouse of Alexandria, the Colossus of Rhodes.

Some of us are parish ministers, auditors, people tied to desks. But then there are the sailors - the sea is my office; the ocean my desk; the wind my companion. Symbolising humanity's spirit of adventure, some go down to the sea in ships; so anchors away; the sailing begins.

The Saviour's Sailing - we're setting sail

We're getting on board for not such a distant journey - nor with that glint in the eye possessed by those who are ambitious. But we have a **kind of** ambition. He'd said to us "come and see", and we'd come and seen. A

"casting out", some healings at Simon's house. A preaching tour around Galilee, an argument with some Pharisees. Just earlier today he's started telling us parables: the kingdom of God is like a sower, a mustard seed, a lamp that cannot be hidden. It's early in our travels with him, so yes, we're only just beginning to learn. But there's a movement to it, a waking up of what's within. So he says to us "let's go across to the other side", and we go - of course we do. And climbing into the boat, maybe the more imaginative of us are allowing ourselves to wonder about what's on that other side! There's no Colossus of Rhodes. But still we are humanity on a journey into the "come and see". So anchors aweigh; the sailing begins.

The Psalmist's Sailing - the crying out

Those of us who are not sailors might not extend much sympathy now to those who'd gone down to the sea in ships. Because we, who have the conservative superannuation schemes, who make careful investments not just in money but also in life, sometimes resent the way that the sailors have made us feel. Their talk of romantic lighthouses and beautiful sunsets has mocked us for our timidity. Hasn't it? So when the storm hits them, and their courage melts away . . . well? Go out on the open sea, you're going to find storms - it comes with the ambition. And what are **we** to do? From my desk, I can't reach you, or won't. ("**We** shall decide", one prime minister said to some boat people (travellers in need) "we shall decide who comes into our country and in what circumstances". Then he turned away 433 people. On the psalmist's sailing, there is a crying out in distress. The crying out . . .

The Saviour's Sailing - the crying out

Out on the water, calamity is real not only for high-risking sailors. It's also real for the wee boat of faith-travellers. On their boat, headed for "the other side", a storm bears down. The waves beat into it, so that it's already being swamped. From this beating down, they form a question for their Lord: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

It's a question for every frightened person who's trying to believe in God, or trying to make sense of the random or the destructive. "Don't you care, Lord, that we're perishing?"

Bombs fall on citizens; don't you care? My job disappears and I have no income; don't you care? Tuvalu is disappearing under the tide; don't you care? Many the waves. On the Saviour's sailing, this is the nature of their crying out.

The Psalmist's Sailing - structure of the storm

Not many narrative details here - just that myriad waves take them up (mounted up to heaven), then crash them down (to the depths). It's like what they used to call "manic". No doubt there's a mounting sense of being far from land, and an overwhelming sense of knowing that we could drown here. We don't have gills, we don't have scales. We were not designed to be here. Where is here? On the trade routes? On the adventure? Surely human beings **were** designed for this - otherwise why the lure? The itchy feet? Well, that's what we used to think - before we got caught in a storm. Now we don't know what to think. As the psalm says "we're at our wits' end". So what does the frightened human being do? It calls out for help.

The Saviour's Sailing - structure of the storm

We know it's night time (hard to see). We know there are other boats around - though we know nothing of who's in them and how they're doing (hard to know about fellow travellers sometimes). And we know that in the stern of the boat, on a cushion, is the One in whom they've had a growing faith. The trouble is that he's asleep. Those questions about bombs, unemployment, global warming, are being formed in a boat where the God-figure sleeps. So, that sleeping becomes part of the storm. Structure of the storm for the believing community? The fear that this Body of Christ on the cushion makes no difference, because it either does not notice, or does not care. O, Body of Christ - let those with ears listen!

The Psalmist's Sailing - the resolution and the song

Well, suddenly the storm is over, and those on the Psalmist's ship attribute it to their God. They're glad that things now are quiet, and that they've arrived not in their desired "port", but their desired "haven". Prior to the storm, they might have talked about "port". Now they speak of "haven". There has been something in the storm that makes boring old land a gift - a safe place, a firmness under foot for which they now are grateful. I suspect that the sailors will be back out a sea before long - because that's what they do. But **they** say that from now on, they'll be sailing only while giving thanks. While people will point at them now and say "resilient", they will think of themselves as "blessed".

When we are safe, when we are at home, when we look back on the horror from a perspective of "life preserved", the song of the psalmist is sung: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever."

The Saviour's Sailing - the resolution and the song

To the question "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing", the Saviour wakes. He rebukes the wind, says to the sea "be silent, be still".

So like those who go down to the sea in ships, the disciples are saved from the waves. What did we suggest those waves were? Fear that God doesn't care? Fear that having come to see, we wouldn't see a thing. Fear that none of his parables meant anything real. Fear that the end of the story of faith is something like "death by drowning".

With some of that now stilled (or all of it stilled), he says to them now "why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Well, **do** they? I'm not sure. But we're told that they're filled with a great new **fear** - "who is this", they ask, "that even the wind and the sea obey him?" If there is a disciples' post-storm song, the lyrics are these: "that even the wind and sea obey him, who is this?"

A reflection on our storms

While at one point in these reflections, I kind of assumed that most of us aren't swashbuckling sailors who embrace the peril of the sea. And that may be right. But some of us (despite our natural inclinations) become refugees and need safe harbour. The phenomenon of the "boat people" isn't fading away. And all of us landlubbers (refugees or not) are required, to different degrees, to go out into the world and make a living - we need to sail a few waters, get out onto the trade route, gather some bounty. Because if we don't, who's going to pay our mortgage, our rent? And there are times when the challenge of paying the bills is something like being on the sea - as interest rates go up (mounted up to heaven), and jobs disappear (down to the depths) - caught in a storm of "things".

But maybe for us (who are disciples), it's that **other** sailing that speaks to us as well - when we're trying to work out who God is, and when our way through that has become a storm - a fear that our language about God caring doesn't fit. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

To our question "do you not care", he brings a question of his own: "why are you afraid?"

Perhaps, for us, the key is answering the question "who then is this, in whom our forebears in faith learned not to be afraid?" Maybe the key is to journey a wee bit further with the "stiller of the storm" . . .

We keep a moment of quiet.

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