

Anglican Church Arnhem-Nijmegen – 23 June 2024

Reading: Mark 4:35-41 (Revd Wim Kuiper)

I don't know about you, but I have to admit that I am not a big fan of being in or on the water. I love to watch the sea (as I did very often when I lived in Sunderland), or the river as I do now every day in my home town. But I prefer to keep my feet firmly on the ground. The Netherlands is of course a country full of water. This is even clearer when you look at it from above, from a plane, ascending or descending at Schiphol airport. As many of you will have done. No wonder that the vast majority of the people in this country love all those many water related activities such as swimming, sailing and skating. So my great unease with water, from a very young age, is quite strange and I have no proper explanation for it. But this is why this particular story has always spoken to me in a very powerful way. Thinking of myself on that boat with Jesus sleeping when the waves roll over it. How could he? And hearing even those experienced fishermen kind of freaking out; 'We are about to perish!' And then of course there is this majestic scene of Jesus standing upright in the boat with all his authority as God's Son. Rebuking the storm by saying those simple, clear words: 'Peace! Be still!' And the water is dead calm again, and all the anxiety simply eases off.

This story is such a strong reminder of the fact that when we allow Jesus to come on board with us, 'just as he is', to accompany us 'just as we are', he will never leave us alone in whatever storms we are facing. Staying close to Jesus will not immediately take away all our fears and anxieties. Fighting our fears, especially those who are completely irrational and not helpful at all, can continue to be a tough fight. As many of us, including me, will have experienced. But Jesus does speak these same words in the midst of our storms: 'Peace. Be still!'. Words that may touch our heart and bring us some kind of calmness and inner peace, even despite all that we are going through. Already because we somehow know and feel, that we are not on our own. That God's protection will never leave us. That we can never fall out of his saving hands.

Today's Psalm has this same reassuring message. 'Those who know the name of the Lord, will put their trust in you, for you, Lord, have never failed those who seek you'. And as this trust grows, we just stay aware of God's constant presence with us. Even when God seems to be silent for a while. When Jesus

seems to be asleep. We may still feel, hear, sense him saying to us: 'Do not be afraid for I am with you'. And also: 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.' (words from the book of the prophet Isaiah).

When the waters have calmed down so suddenly, the disciples ask that great question 'Who then is he?' There is of course no simple answer to this, but we have the revelation of his name 'I am', indicating that constant presence with us. And in Jesus, God has shown us his enduring loving kindness and abundant saving grace.

But, though God will never forsake us, he has not promised to us that it will always be plain sailing. This was certainly not the case for St Paul either. In our passage from his second letter to the Corinthians, he also comes up with a beautiful quotation from Isaiah; 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' But we should not overlook the beginning of this passage: 'As we work together with him', that is God. So trusting in God is not just about passively waiting for the Lord to calm our storms. But it is also about actively working alongside him, to get us where he wants us to be. Just as the disciples are not sleeping, but take in the end the right action, namely to awaken Jesus. So work together with God, with Jesus! And the passage also ends with another, perhaps somewhat strange call to action: 'Open wide your hearts also'. Even when we find ourselves in the midst of all kinds of troubles and afflictions, or perhaps better said precisely when this the case, we are called to open wide are hearts for others. This is how St Paul concludes his beautifully poetic words with which he describes all the many hardships that he himself is going through. He, nevertheless and surprisingly, calls it a favourable time and seems to be able to celebrate every day as a day of salvation. So even in the midst of a litany of hardships, he tells the Corinthians that he has also experienced purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love and truthful speech. There is sorrow for sure, but also rejoicing, there is dying and new life, poverty that is turned into enriching others and so having nothing, yet possessing everything. This is the strange but also true experience of so many others, perhaps also of yourselves. An experience of how our tragedies, our afflictions in the end do not lead us to narrow, but instead to widen our hearts. A widening that implies a gradual shedding of our fears and anxieties, and finding peace in trusting on God, on his ability to bring good out of any afflictions.

May the Lord help us, especially when we are out on a rough sea, to deepen our trust in God's saving love and so to widen our hearts. Amen