

Who do you say that I am?

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost—13 August 2017
Reverend Martin Johnson

Genesis 37.1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105.1-6, 16-22; Romans 10.4-15; Matthew 14.22-36

The last words of the first reading this morning are crucial to our self-understanding: 'And they took Joseph to Egypt' Joseph—he of the technicolour dreamcoat, 'poor, poor, Joseph what you gonna do?' He and his brothers are the last of the patriarchs, the sons of Jacob (Israel). From now on the voice of God falls silent in the biblical account. The next time God speaks it will be from the burning bush to Moses: 'come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt'. There begins the great story of the exodus and the greatest Biblical story of them all the splitting of the Red Sea, 'through the waters they walked dry shod!' Water is chaos, it is evil, the leviathan lurks there! In the Genesis creation account the spirit moves over the waters of the void bringing order, day and night, dry land and oceans. For our Biblical forebears water was indeed to be feared; only God could tame the deep! Our salvation is wrought out of water—think baptism!

So welcome to the good ship St Philip. I recall my first impression when coming into this building, just about a year ago, it was that I was entering the hull of a ship. This is a *navus* in Latin and from that word we get nave—the body of a church—and, of course, navy. So here we all are gathered together in this ship, we are sailing through the storms of life, the waves are crashing around us, but we are safe. Yes, we are safe but not just because we are in this ship, that's not correct, we are safe because we are not alone.

If we enter this place, or any church, and close the doors behind us and think that we are safe, that we have insulated ourselves from the storms of the outside world then I think we have misunderstood the nature of church. The gospel account we heard this morning from Matthew tells us that the boat was battered by the waves. In the other sea stories, it's even scarier, the waves were crashing into the boat, and the boat was in danger of filling with water. So, the outside world and all its fury and hatred, greed, betrayal and violence is battering our boat, perhaps this 'coming to church' business is more dangerous than we might think! Indeed, each of us is bringing into the boat our own issues, fear, illness, bereavement or loss, these things are the reality of life. But what is significant is what happens to us when we bring our vulnerabilities into church and importantly how they are transformed and how we are transformed.

We can never completely separate out the various elements of our lives and neither should we. Every part of our lives is important there are no separate compartments—church, work, sport, money, relationships; all of our lives are brought into the ship. All of our communities issues are brought into the ship, and sometimes they crash in; politics, sex, drugs, crime, health, education, asylum seekers the whole lot, little wonder the disciples thought they were sinking. It's easy for us to feel the same. 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid. You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

It is very significant that when the sea accounts occur in the gospels they have a similar context. In every case Jesus has been busy, he has been trying get away, in every case he is clearly tired, in another account Jesus is asleep in the stern, the story in this morning's gospel he is away resting, he has spent a quiet night alone and he comes to them at dawn. There is a sense that Jesus is absent and even when he is with the disciples they struggle to understand who he is—it's a ghost! The stories speak very powerfully of Jesus' humanity and his divinity, but the disciples struggle to get it.

We are no different in so many ways than those disciples. We use the Psalms in the church every day and they express our deepest thoughts and fears, look at Psalm 44: 'Arouse yourself, why do you sleep Lord. Awake. Do not cast us off forever.' We don't say these words just for the sake of it we use the psalms because that's how we feel isn't it? Where is the God of Jesus when the storms of life are threatening to sink our boat? Has the voice of God fallen silent yet again?

'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid. You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

This ship, the good ship St Philip, is the point where for us the human and the divine meet. The divide between heaven and earth is very thin here. We have come into this boat this morning as fellow travellers with all our issues and concerns and worries. In our prayers, we will have added to our concerns the cares and problems of all the world and its peoples. There is no way we can bear it in this space, the weight is far too much, if it were just us our boat would have sunk long ago, but it hasn't. This Jesus of the gospels is busy: he moves among his people, he heals, reconciles, calms, he is angry and he grieves, he eats and drinks, he celebrates, he prays, he teaches. But eventually in the middle of the gospel account, in the pivotal moment, he asks his followers: 'so who do you say that I am?'

This question is asked of us and our answer will determine whether this boat sinks or floats. Very soon we will take bread and wine, very ordinary things, and we will gather around this altar, us ordinary folk, and we will hear those words: 'on the night he was betrayed'. At that moment, our boat is very close to sinking. That question is ringing in our ears: 'So who do you say that I am?' And then the words: 'This is my Body, this is my blood ... take it'.

'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid. You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

All our concerns, our worries, the problems of the world, all those betrayals, can now be seen in the light of the one who comes among us, who calms the storms of life. 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' Our boat will never be overwhelmed if we continue to bring to God, in Christ, ourselves our souls and bodies, if we continue to bring to Christ the concerns and problems of the world and allow him to calm them and redeem them. The last words of the gospel are even more important to our self-understanding: Truly you are the Son of God. Amen.