

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Elemental Chaos and Christ

Genesis 2.4b-9, 15-25

Luke 8.22-25

2 before Lent C 27th February 2019 (Linton 8 am)

I'm sure we've all heard sermons on Jesus' stilling of the storm which go something like this: *'We all face storms in life – perhaps through illness, bereavement, broken relationships or financial difficulties. When they come upon us, we can remember that Jesus is travelling with us – he's in our boat – and we can call upon him. He's the one who has power to bring peace, whatever storms events bring us.'*

That's not a bad sermon summary – it has a message which has been a help to many people, I'm sure, and it may be helpful for some of us to take into our week. – for who knows what may come upon us? But I'd like to take a few minutes to scratch a bit deeper at the symbolism of Christ's stilling of the storm. In particular, I'd like to think about what the sea means in biblical culture; of course, it means just 'the sea', or in the case of Galilee, a very large lake where some of Jesus' disciples had been used to making their living as fishermen. But in the Bible, and for the Jews 'the sea' stands for something more: it stands as a symbol of

untameable chaos, something very fearful – and that's understandable, for who can tame the sea? But it was a very strong and prevalent symbol for the people of the Bible, who weren't natural seafarers like some of the nations around them: this is why the psalms and book of Job, celebrate God's victory over the mighty waters, and his mastery of leviathan, the great monster of the deep. In the book of Daniel (chapter 7), monsters emerge from the sea to make war on God's people, and in the vision of the 'new heaven and new earth' in the book of Revelation, 21 we are told that there is 'no more sea' (a vision which provoked Rudyard Kipling, coming from Britain, a much more seafaring nation than that of the Hebrews, to write a poem in which the sailors beg God to give them back their sea!)

So, the sea is more than the sea, if you see what I mean. (Sorry!) It's a sign of chaos, of all those elemental forces which we can't tame.

The third chapter of Genesis, (for which the scene was set today in our first reading from the chapter before it,) traces the entry of chaos into the world to something that human beings did. We all know the story of the Fall – of Eve and Adam and the snake, Satan, and the forbidden fruit - and although it's a myth, not a scientific or historical account of 'how things went wrong in the world' – it's none the less powerful in pointing us to some important truths. And among these truths is the fact that some of the most

elemental and untameable forces are found within ourselves, part of that condition which the Church has dubbed 'Original Sin', our inability to command completely every instinct, every thought, word and deed, the way there's something in us (our lower nature, some call it) at war with the nature and character into which Christ calls us to grow.

Sometimes, even when we look calm and in control on the outside, there's something that may feel like *chaos* within,. A verse of the well-known nineteenth century hymn by Charlotte Elliott, picks up on this: '*Just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt; Fightings and fears, within, without... O Lamb of God, I come.*' Notice that imagery: '*tossed about...*': it's imagery of the sea – of elemental chaos.

When I look out on you, respectable and peaceable 8 o'clock worshippers, it's hard to believe that there could be any elemental chaos inside you; you may feel the same, as you look at me standing sedately here at the altar! But I can tell you, I do know what that experience feels like well enough to find the verse I've just quoted extremely telling... Perhaps some of you do, too, and have sung it with heartfelt meaning.

So the sea, standing for chaos – it can symbolise not just those storms that come upon us from outside circumstances; it can express very powerfully our inner need of God simply as human beings who share in

Original Sin, or Fallenness, or whatever you like to call it – all that side of our nature with which we struggle.

Another very powerful biblical thought about chaos relates to the 'powers and principalities' opposed to God which lie behind some of the political, economic and institutional systems of the world – all those things which undermine the visions of harmony, justice and peace which we seek after. For the biblical writers, these 'powers and principalities' were personal spiritual beings, influencing and holding in sway the human powers of the world, so that they oppose the ways of God's kingdom. For the Jews of the first century, these powers were most clearly embodied in the brutality of the Roman empire and its armies. In all three Gospels which tell of Jesus' stilling of the storm, he arrives almost immediately afterwards in Country of the Gerasenes and pacifies a man possessed by many demons, who said his name was 'Legion'. It's as though the severity of this man's conditions wasn't only tied up with the *number* of demons he and others believed were possessing him. More than that – it's as though his mental and spiritual state embodied the oppression *all* the people suffered from the prevailing and crushing 'principality and power'.

We may or may not find attractive the concept of actual 'principalities and powers in the high places' standing behind the destructiveness of bad government, of corporate greed, of misguided or evil

ideologies, and of an economic system based on consumption, which is destroying the world – we may or may not see the power of chaos *personified* in the idea of such spirits; - but the chaos itself is certainly there to see, whenever we look at the news! Chaos, an untameable force like the sea, tossing and breaking many lives and hopes, and even the planet's very future.

So, when we ponder the disciples' urgent cry to Jesus in the teeth of the storm. when we hear with our inward ear his extraordinary responses – to the wind and waves, '*Peace, be still*', (Mark 4.39), and to the disciples themselves, '*Where is your faith?*' - we may hear the extremely stretching challenge to believe in his power not *only* over the accidents and events which befall and up-end us, but also over the inner chaos of mind and heart, the potential for which is somehow written into our nature, and even over the systems, corporations and governments which run the world and our societies, and the chaos they create.

if such power seem far too much for our hearts to believe in (and it certainly requires a huge leap of faith) we can still, in our half-belief and unbelief, like the disciples, bring all this chaos into the Lord's presence with the urgent cries of our hearts: '*Master, Master we are perishing!*'; Who knows how such cries may open a window for the coming of peace, calm, and restoration?