

Mark 4v35-41 - Who is your Jesus?

It has often been said that Mark is a book of two halves, two questions. The first half is dominated by the question “Who is this Jesus?”. A question that is answered by Peter in 8v29 and which then leads to the second question “What kind of Christ will he be?”

We are firmly in the first half of the gospel today, and we very definitely see the question “who *is* this Jesus?” asked by the disciples. I think it is a question which is good for us to ask too!

In this section of Mark’s gospel he brings together four narratives that explore Jesus’ mastery over this world – over demons, over disease, over death and, in this first narrative, over disaster.

We sometimes think of Mark as being the ‘poor relation’ of gospels. It doesn’t have the uniqueness of John, the Jewish context of Matthew or the historical precision of Luke. Yet despite being the shortest of the gospels it is bursting with eye-witness details. In this passage today we see uniquely the hour of the day (“when evening came”), the presence of the other boats (v36), Jesus sleeping on a cushion (v38), the details of the disciples’ sarcasm (v38) and Jesus’ rebuke (v40).

First of all, I’d like to think about the storm. The disciples included some very experienced fishermen amongst their number, but the Sea of Galilee is well known even today for fierce storms that can rise up suddenly and threaten life and limb. Picture the scene with me. It was evening when you set out, it is now dark, with the milky way providing scant illumination above, and perhaps some lights visible dimly from the coast. Then the wind starts becoming fiercer. Peter and John exchange worried glances because they know what is coming. The water starts becoming choppy, the stars disappear behind clouds, the wind howls and the boat bucks up and down, waves crashing against it, and then over the side, drenching everyone in the noise and the darkness...

A Question.

Is the passenger in a car safer with their eyes open, or their eyes closed?

Fearful because Jesus didn’t seem to be present

Looking around at the waves and the wind, the storm and the surge, they knew they were in trouble. Worse than that, they thought they were probably going to die. Storms will come. The apostle Peter reminds us: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12). There are many who do not seem to understand this. The disciples seemed to be shocked that they were in this position. After all, wasn’t Jesus with them? Wouldn’t God protect his Messiah, and therefore protect his followers? How then could this happen?

Why isn’t Jesus doing something? How can Jesus allow this fear and danger to come into my life? “Don’t you care if I drown?”

What a thing to say to Jesus. “*Don’t you care?*”

How hurtful it would be for an irate child to say “you don’t care” when nothing could be further from the truth. You may have had this experience yourself when a child or a parent or a sibling or a friend has accused you of not caring when you were doing *everything you could* to make a difference for them.

Yet the gospel doesn’t shrink away from the honesty of their response. And I’m sure that if history were to look back at us on this day we could be divided into two groups – one group of people who have had storms in their life when God seemed to be absent, Jesus seemed to be sleeping... and a second group who have storms yet to come in their life, where God will seem to be absent and Jesus will seem to be sleeping.

Difficult times come our way, tragedies even. Times when we will cry out to heaven to make sense of things and heaven appears silent, heaven appears sleeping.

But I’d bring you back to my question earlier. Is the passenger in a car safer with their eyes open, or their eyes closed? I’m pretty sure that whether you feel more comfortable one way or another, your safety is exactly the same in either case.

And so it is with God.

I remember a time many years ago, when I was living in a bedsit in central London. It was evening, some things had gone very wrong, and it felt like God was a million miles away. Desperate to find some meaning, but with my feelings dangling from a cliff edge, I picked up my bible and, without even a prayer, opened it randomly and read something, anything, in case it might help.

In God’s providence, I opened up to today’s passage. And I realised the size of this tremendous truth. Whether the disciples could see Jesus active among them or not, his presence was there and they were secure with him. Sometimes Jesus may not be immediately obvious to us, but he is still Lord of our lives, and he is fulfilling his plans in us and through us. I wanted to live by sight, and at that moment Jesus was telling me to live by faith, and to trust him.

After stilling the storm with a command, that’s what he says to his disciples. “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” It isn’t the last time he will challenge them about whether they trust in him or not! His question is a rhetorical one. He isn’t expecting an answer, but he is challenging them.

He is challenging their belief that unless Jesus was up and active amongst them, he wasn’t at work and they were not under his care.

They were fearful because Jesus didn’t seem to be present.

Let’s learn from their example and avoid their behaviour. Don’t be fearful. Storms may come, but Jesus is faithful and will carry us through them to our eternal destiny!

So what happens next?

Fearful because Jesus seemed to be too present!

They started off afraid of what was outside the boat, now they are afraid of the person who is inside the boat!

It's a fascinating observation by Mark. Matthew says they are 'amazed', Luke says they are in 'fear and amazement'. But eyewitness Mark says "They were *terrified*".

The storm was frightening, but it was a known quantity. Now, however, they realise they are in the presence of something greater, more awesome in the true sense of the word, than anything they have known before. They are in the presence of a supernatural power which defies their understanding. The very presence of God.

"Who is this?" they ask. They thought they knew Jesus, but they still had him in a convenient little box. The wise teacher. The gentle healer. The clever storyteller. But he has just blown that box wide open.

Is your Jesus in a box today?

It is easy to craft a religious box for him. A beautiful box, a comfortable box – by which I mean one which we are comfortable with. Jesus in a box which doesn't challenge our lives. Jesus in a box which doesn't allow for his supernatural intervention in this world.

Is your Jesus in a box today? Because if he is, I think you need to let him out

What a paradox this passage provides us! Disciples who are fearful because Jesus seems too far away, and fearful when he seems too present! How like us they are... fearful when we don't see enough of Jesus in our lives, and perhaps fearful of what it would mean if He were to be active in his supernatural power.

But wasn't that his promise? That he would be active in his supernatural power through the church too? After all, Paul admonishes the Corinthian church by saying (1 Cor 2v4-5) "*My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.*"

I believe that nowadays we are less in danger of being afraid of Jesus' absence, and more afraid of his presence. What do you think?

A final thought. Talking about sinking reminds me of the Titanic, which sunk just over 100 years ago.

Survivor Eva Hart remembers the night, April 15, 1912, on which the Titanic plunged 12,000 feet to the Atlantic floor, some two hours and forty minutes after an iceberg tore a

300-foot gash in the starboard side: "I saw all the horror of its sinking, and I heard, even more dreadful, the cries of drowning people."

Although twenty life-boats and rafts were launched-too few and only partly filled-most of the passengers ended up struggling in the icy seas while those in the boats waited a safe distance away.

Lifeboat No. 14 did row back to the scene after the unsinkable ship slipped from sight at 2:20 A.m. Alone, it chased cries in the darkness, seeking and saving a precious few. Incredibly, no other boat joined it. Some were already overloaded, but in virtually every other boat, those already saved rowed their half-filled boats aimlessly in the night, listening to the cries of the lost. They feared what would happen, and so did nothing.

Let's make sure we do not let fear lead us to do nothing.