

Sermon for 23rd June 2024, Year B, Proper 7

Preached at St Serf Shettleston

2 Cor 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

Sermon

Before we get onto the iconic Christian image of Jesus in a storm-tossed boat on the sea of Galilee, I want to ponder first our passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, in which he betrays some of his frustration about a church that he founded and loves, seemingly becoming divided, preoccupied with who's right and who's wrong, at peace neither with God nor each other. In other words, quite missing the point of their faith! It's as if they've been given this astonishing gift of God's love and grace, and yet they're now arguing over the colour of the carpets.

Even so, Paul also seems rather worryingly passionate about all the wrong kinds of things. For a start, he's at great pains to point out how much he's suffered for the gospel – in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger – the list is so long! To us this all seems rather like masochistic bragging. While we preachers are welcome to make the odd humorous anecdote about our lives, or to make a humble confession about our (many) human failings, boasting about our suffering for our faith doesn't sit comfortably with most of us. It even starts to sound a bit like fanaticism, and fanatics tend to do really embarrassing things in public, and worse, they try to get us to do them as well!

The temptation for all of us, and preachers especially, is to become exemplars of moderation, not rocking the boat – well, there was a lot of boat rocking in the gospel reading, but I promise we'll get to that later! As Episcopalians, we naturally prefer the middle way between two extremes. If the Church is arguing

vigorously whether to install blue carpets or red, we might put balm on the wounds by wisely suggesting a nice episcopal purple as a compromise, or perhaps even no carpet at all!

But Paul is in a different mindset altogether. He's not really interested in compromise and accommodation. Instead, he's appealing to his congregation to remember that their faith is all about Jesus Christ, and about the power of God's love to transform our hearts so that red carpets and blue carpets are forgotten because we're too busy loving each other with open-hearted childlike vulnerability and innocence of spirit.

This is why Paul goes on apparently boasting about his purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, and so on. He's not trying to show off. He's reminding his congregation of what they were originally attracted to, and how far they've fallen into arguing about things that don't matter.

It's as if the real heart of the Christian faith – the community of love known as the kingdom of God – is simply too uncomfortable for us. The stakes are too high. We need something... smaller, more manageable, to focus on.

I remember back when I was working in the City in London, our managing director had invited a big firm of management consultants to come in and give a presentation about a possible new computer system we wanted them to build. A whole team of about a dozen young IT consultants duly showed up and trooped into a meeting in the boardroom, where they proceeded to ignore us – the client – for about an hour, squabbling among themselves about which exciting new technology they would use to build the system. Eventually, our managing director stood up and wrote on the whiteboard, “What does the client want?”, sat down, and waited for silence.

These consultants had made the same mistake as the Corinthians – they had become obsessed with arguing over issues that interested only them, and had forgotten why they were really there.

The truth is, Christian community is not at all about coming to a genteel agreement about the best colour of carpets or even sharing the same opinions on which is the best hymnbook! We are called instead to become friends of God and each other, even though, as Paul demonstrates, this may well result in sacrifice and challenges. Agreeing on every detail of faith is so much less important than sharing God's passion for sacrificial love, humility, goodness, and all the virtues that Paul lists in his letter.

We are here in church on Sundays because at some level we love these virtues and want to embody them, and yet it's so easy to forget them. We all know the experience of the disciples in the boat, tossed by stormy seas, far more anxious about not sinking to have a moment to remember why we're on the boat with Jesus in the first place.

Sometimes I think that even clergy often forget that Jesus is right here in the boat with us, sleeping comfortably on a cushion. Or maybe we know he's here, but we think that it's not worth waking him up until we've fixed the sinking ship by our own efforts – I mean, what use is Jesus in a storm? He's not even a sailor.

Back on the Sea of Galilee, when it's blowing a hoolie and things are looking bad, the disciples do indeed wake Jesus up, possibly more out of outrage that he's sleeping through it all rather than any hope that he'll do something. But he does do something. He calms the storm and then says, incredulously, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Honestly, I'm quite surprised they didn't push him overboard in that moment, but his point was made.

Like Paul's Corinthian church, the disciples certainly had many reasons to be afraid, but Jesus isn't saying there's nothing to fear, he's reminding them that in the midst of it all, God is right there in the boat with them, and he loves them. Afflictions and suffering will happen, arguments and disagreements are inevitable, but we are never alone in our boat, and all we need to do is keep remembering why we're here together – what it is that makes the struggle and persistence worthwhile.

So, when our church conversations have become less about our personal preferences and our fearful desire to be right, and more about how we might better love and serve one another, remembering and experiencing the joys of being beloved children of God – then we will have heeded Paul's challenge. 'Our heart is wide open to you', he says. 'Open wide your hearts also'.

Jesus is sleeping in our storm-tossed hearts. Shall we wake him up?