

## The Third Sunday after Trinity: In the Boat with Jesus

**Readings: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41**

Football is famously a game of two halves. And so are traditional church buildings like ours: a chancel or quire, and a nave.

Why is it called a 'nave'? It's because if you look at it upside down it resembles a ship – in Latin, *navis* (from which we get words like 'navy' and 'navigation'). Even before the days of church buildings, some early Christians saw the whole Church as a ship: the people safely enclosed with their Lord, sailing serenely above the wicked waters of the world.

The Church was sometimes called '*the ark of salvation*' – after the most famous ship in the Bible, the one built by Noah for his floating zoo. Noah's family and the chosen animals were safe in the ark, everybody else was drowned.

Well, if that's how we see the Church, it's pretty smug and heartless – like the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American hymn:

We are the chosen few  
And all the rest are damned:  
There's plenty of room in hell for them,  
We don't want heaven crammed.

For some reason that hymn hasn't made it into our hymn-book here ... And thank God, for that kind of ark sounds the exact opposite of any vessel you might sail in with Jesus! His ship isn't some grand cruise liner or pretentious aircraft carrier. It's a *small fishing boat*, crossing the lake to the other side. And the people in it, the embryonic Church, are *not* secure: they're overwhelmed in a sea and a wind that seem so much stronger than their little boat. 'We're perishing!' they cry.

What's worse, while the storm rages their teacher is fast asleep. After they've woken him up and he's brought calm, he asks 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' Clearly not, for Mark says (literally) 'they feared a great fear' – as happens so often in this mysterious gospel that we're reading Sunday by Sunday over the next five months; right up to the end, when the women flee from the tomb in terror.

'Have you no faith?' But there *is* faith in this story. Not so much faith in Jesus as the faith of Jesus; the faith that is demonstrated precisely in *his sleeping*. For faith isn't about screwing yourself up to believe something; it's about letting go. And letting go by sleeping soundly, even when there's turmoil around you, is evidence of utter trust in God's providence. Utter trust that even if you are overwhelmed you will not be overcome. Trust that takes Jesus all the way to the cross.

So this is a story of faith (or trust) and of salvation (or safety); and it isn't just a historical curiosity. No: as we heard St Paul say, 'Now is the day of salvation'. Jesus the sleeping Lord is risen, never to die again. Now, whether we're sitting in the nave or the chancel, now we are with Jesus in that boat, learning the way of faith, probably making mistakes in the voyage. Perhaps overwhelmed, but not overcome.

So does Church membership keep us safe so that we can sleep in peace, protected from all the dangers and temptations of the world? Is it still our ark of salvation, the guarantee that we shall not perish everlastingly?

Well, there's bound to be danger at sea, however large or modern your ship is. For the sea is liquid, it is ever shifting, it can never be completely charted. So this faith that is learned and practised in St Mark's boat is not built on a rock (as in St Matthew's Gospel) but *built on waves*. Which is why it begins with a kind of drowning, in the water of baptism.

There's another little warning in this story, should we be getting too complacent in our ecclesiastical ark. It's a detail that Matthew and Luke omit in their telling of the story. But Mark says, 'they took him with them in the boat ... [*and*] *other boats were with him*'. We've no idea who were in those other boats or what happened to them in the storm. But they were 'with him' – and just before in Mark's gospel Jesus had appointed his apostles precisely '*to be with him*'. So it seems that having faith and being with Jesus aren't limited to the official ark of the visible Church. There may be a whole flotilla of faith afloat in the world around us.

There's one final thing about living and sailing in this Jesus-boat. If you look up at the roof of the nave, you'll see that even if (like Salisbury Cathedral) it was built on water it can't actually sail, because its keel is the wrong way up. For the Church to set sail, to float and move in the world, it needs, we need to be *turned upside down*.

Turn round ... change your course ... repent! Jesus' invitation to his friends is 'Let us go across to the other side'. They didn't know, we don't know, what lies across the turbulent water on the further shore. But we are baptised in water and Spirit, and we've set sail upon the watery world, in a company larger than we ever imagine.

So let's not be afraid to let go and be turned upside down. Let's take the risk of sleep, the risk of faith. We may be overwhelmed again and again; but we shall not be overcome.

*Christopher Burdon*