

**Second Sunday before Lent
24th February 2019
10.15am Cathedral Eucharist
Revelation 4, Luke 8.22-25**

We don't get many opportunities to sing *Eternal father, strong to save do we?* We know it of course as part of our national heritage but it's rare to sing it away from Remembrance Sunday or some nautical anniversary. Today of course, we sang it because the Gospel we have just heard speaks of Jesus calming the restless wave and the second verse tells the story.

*O Christ, whose voice the waters heard
And hushed their raging at thy word,
Who walkedst on the foaming deep,
And calm amid the storm didst sleep:
O hear us when we cry to thee
For those in peril on the sea.*

The other time it is sung here is always on the 22nd May, when old sailors and family members come to the Memorial Chapel to remember the 722 men who died when HMS Gloucester was sunk off Crete in 1941. It is always an incredibly moving occasion.

Well we may not sing it that often but it's actually the second time I've sung it this weekend. Yesterday it was sung as part of the service when it was my pleasure to dedicate the new lifeboat at the Severn Area Rescue Association Lifeboat Station at Sharpness. This fast new lifeboat is the most advanced of its type in the country, serving on the waters of the Severn, described yesterday by an expert as the most dangerous maritime environment in the world.

It was a grand occasion with civic dignitaries and volunteers coming together to launch the new craft with prayer and with today's Gospel reading. Looking at the brooding water of the river flowing by at over thirty miles an hour, we could all see how much easier saving life would be if all we had to do was speak firmly to the wind and the water as Jesus did. As I read the Gospel, one could almost hear the people saying again

to themselves about Jesus; 'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him!'

Brooding water of river or sea is a biblical setting for turbulence and unrest in life as the imagination is set loose on any difficult aspect of the human condition. In Exodus, the Red Sea stands between the Israelites and freedom. Jonah prays for deliverance after the sailors throw him into the ocean, and the whale comes to save him. Much of the Old Testament poetry sections speak of the great sea monster, the Leviathan, to frighten us. Just today in Morning Prayer the words of Psalm 104 said; '*There is the sea, spread far and wide and there move creatures beyond number, both small and great. There go the ships, and there is that Leviathan which you have made to play in the deep*'.

In the New Testament the sea is also a place of trial and uncertainty. Paul is shipwrecked but is saved to write his letters. Later in the Book of Revelation, when the vision of glory we heard about earlier is complete, the sea is no more. Clearly at several times in scripture, the self-righting *Pride of Sharpness* lifeboat would have come in handy.

Rough waters in life are best avoided, but sometimes we just have to ride out the storm, or even be saved. How much easier it would be if life was calm, if the view was always blue and beautiful, and if the horizon was always clear. But we know human existence is not like that, otherwise this creation which we have been given would not be real but false and futile. Lives have to be saved because lives matter. And it's all very well trying to avoid getting into trouble but for Christians, this is not an option. You see part of the meaning of this Gospel reading is to teach us that storms will come, often when we are asleep, least prepared, creeping up on us like that Leviathan, and yet as followers of Christ, we are well equipped to respond. Jesus is not calling us to avoid the storms of life, but to be in the storms with him, and to have faith.

Jesus calls us to follow him in the midst of the raging sea, to help bring about God's plan and purpose for the world. We are called to speak firm and clear words of peace and calm, confident in God's love and eternal rule. So whether the storm of our day is terrorism, or disease, whether it is poverty or Brexit uncertainty, whether it is abuse or climate change, we are called to be in the storm and speak the words Christ would have us say as Christians, his voice in the world. This is why we have things to say about the issues of the day, and to get involved in serving those in need and vulnerable, because it is our job as disciples to do so. Being a Christian is not a lifestyle choice, it is not joining a club because we want to feel safe; it is a call to mission, a commissioning to stand face to face with the storms of life and to be counted. In these days in this

country, we may not be called to die for our faith, but we are called to be lifeboat men and women and children, ready to push out into the deep and save lives, and save souls.

At the General Synod this week, Archbishop Justin called on the million people who belong to the Church of England to be a million voices of good news, less afraid to tell others of our faith and to share what we have with those around us. We need to be less shy and reserved and more confident in pushing out the boat of faith so that others can be saved too. What a lifeboat for society a million voices would be if we all spoke with the confidence of Jesus! And he has given us that confidence.

In our first reading, the mystical vision of heaven, there is a sea. There it is before God's throne, a sea of glass, like crystal. This is separating humanity from God's intimate presence, and there is lightning and rumblings to send us away. But into this storm comes Jesus, the Lamb of God, and when we give him honour, that separation is removed. Crying out for salvation, a million voices can say together; *'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.'* This is the song of those with a living faith, not the cry of those in the boat, *'Master, Master, we are perishing!'* Have faith my friends, face up to the storms of life, and rejoice that in saving others, we are saving ourselves.

The Very Revd Stephen Lake, Dean of Gloucester

