

## **Wind, waves, and the boat of humanity (Mark 4:35-41) – USPG Sermon for Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> June**

May I speak in the name of the living God, who creates, redeems, and sustains. Amen

First, second, third – we have got used to a different understanding of waves over the last 15 months or so. Like the disciples on the sea of Galilee, we have watched them rise and hoped that those with responsibility for guiding our nation and other nations understand enough to ensure that we and others aren't swamped. Even now, as we look to be heading into calmer waters, we are looking across the waters to see whether there is a coming wave to be worried about. And as we look back to the last year, we have all adapted our behaviour, shifted our position in the boat to ensure that we deal with the challenge as best we can. Last year concerns were expressed about the NHS being overwhelmed, of the wave ahead being greater than the length of the boat and being pitched and capsizing. And indeed, there have been moments where the oncoming wave has been very threatening, and indeed we have lost many of the most vulnerable in our society.

Historians and epidemiologists tell us there is a close relationship between the spread of disease and human behaviour - politics shape pandemics in fundamental ways. And so too, we can see the close relationship between the waves of disease and the winds of politics. We have witnessed nations where the political leadership has been cavalier or careless, even callous; seen politicians concerned for some groups of citizens but not others; witnessed situations in which resources have been distributed unequally. And in some cases, like Brazil or India or last year in the US, we watched as the waves were whipped higher by such political winds.

Throughout these difficult times our staff at USPG have had the deep privilege of being in close contact with our sisters and brothers from across the world through prayer, regular conversations, and meetings. We have been moved by the courage and compassion of Christian communities across the world who have reached out to support vulnerable communities and families with financial support, often in sacrificial ways, with healthcare and pastoral care and in acts of solidarity in the face of military or political pressure. And in recent weeks we launched an appeal to help the terrible situation in India and we were deeply moved by the generous response from churches and individuals within Britain.

Wind and waves; air and water; breath and refreshment – all essential to sustaining human life, circulating, free and flowing, part of shared inheritance as the blue planet. As the scriptures observe, the 'wind blows where it will' (John 3:8). They are part of a range of elements common to our humanity, a shared inheritance, things that can't be owned by individuals exclusively.

Very different societies have had to respond to the waves of the pandemic in remarkably similar challenges with lockdowns and restrictions. We have been reminded powerfully of our shared vulnerability open to attack by an unseen enemy. The sufferings of others unable to breathe, grieving relatives, struggling economically – are easy to relate to – and yet at the same time despite it being obvious that a global pandemic needs a global solution - national self-interest has come to the fore. The reduction in the UK's aid budget a particularly damaging example. Widespread concern about the distribution of vaccines, another.

In the storms of life – whether natural or created by the actions of humans – the church has often been portrayed as a boat - a place of safety and security. Sometimes that image has taken on a rather dark dimension with the ‘unsaved’ or ‘unenlightened’ abandoned to their fate in the dangerous waters. But there is an older image, within the Christian tradition echoing the story of Noah’s Ark, of the boat as inclusive of all humanity. An image powerfully evoked by Pope Francis last March as he sat, alone, in St Peter’s Square and spoke of the ‘boat of humanity’.

For the Christian there is no fundamental division within humanity. All are made in the image of God, flesh of flesh. As the deep currents of the oceans connect and flow – so there is a powerful sense in which our humanity is a deep shared reality – we all contain chemical elements ultimately derived from the stars; we all share a common pool of DNA. And at the calm centre, at the heart of the boat of humanity – there is the Incarnate One – the most fully human being that there has been – Jesus Christ

As Christians are called to a solidarity with one another that goes beyond the accidents of birth and geography or culture and nation and as St Paul puts it in our reading – in the midst of adversity, threat and challenge, we are called to ‘open wide our hearts’, to love our neighbour as ourselves. And, of course, in our interconnected world that neighbour is global.

Wind and Waves do not speak just of the threat of power they also speak of the promise of transformation. In Christian language they speak of the Holy Spirit blowing through the lives of individuals and communities and of the refreshing waters of baptism – bringing renewal of life – hope, joy reconciliation. These qualities are to be found in abundance in so many of the activities of the churches across the world, and at USPG we have witnessed this time and again over the last year – as Christians from Brazil to Bangladesh – in Malawi, in the Philippines, in India, Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka – to name but a few have reached out with courage and in compassion – especially to those on the margins of society – if you want those on the edge of the boat, those at risk of being caught by the unexpected wave – those stigmatised by HIV/AIDS, marginalised within their societies as a result of poverty or discrimination – or abandoned or disregarded as migrants or refugees. At USPG we have felt deeply privileged to share in such mission through partnership – an opportunity we extend to churches in the UK (<https://www.uspg.org.uk/engage/support5/partners-in-mission/partners-in-mission.php>).

As citizens, It is important that we speak up for a society that reaches out to the vulnerable and marginalised within our world, that laments failures in the global distribution of vaccines or our Government’s decision to restrict Aid – but it is also important for us to remember that as Christians, Jesus sits alongside us and alongside our fellow brothers and sisters from across the world – and call us, like them to the journey of heart that is wide open – not just when the waters are calm, but the wind and the waves are raging.

Amen