

Contexts

Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

Mark 4:35-41 – things to notice

- Follows immediately from last Sunday's Gospel reading
- This passage is part of 3 miraculous actions by Jesus: calming of the storm; exorcising a demon and restoration of life & healing the sick (Jairus' daughter & the woman with the haemorrhage).
- A 'normal' crossing to the other side of the Sea of Galilee
- There are a number of boats, not just the one Jesus is in, but they disappear from the story.
- 'Just as he was' – Jesus has been in the boat teaching. Mark keeps him in the same position during the story.
- A storm erupts quickly – this still happens to day even though the Sea of Galilee is an internal sea – a lake – with a river at either end
- Jesus, exhausted by the day spent preaching, falls asleep. Mark uses Jesus' sleeping through the storm to show his complete confidence in God as well as his human need for sleep.
- The disciples are overcome with panic – they are desperately afraid
- Jesus wakes and calms the storm – sudden storms on the Sea of Galilee still happen today.
- all of which provides the context for the teaching about faith
- Note the disciples' final question: who is this? – Typical Mark theme about the hidden identity of Jesus
- Mark's church in Rome was undergoing persecution and this story is both an invitation to keep faith with God (no matter what happens God is in charge) and a reassurance of God's salvation.

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on for the 11th Sunday ?

Following from last Sunday – parables about the Kingdom - what is life in the Kingdom like? What is in God’s vision for his family? These questions begin to be answered over the next few Sunday.

Life in the Kingdom begins with faith and confidence in God especially in the midst of epic struggles which threaten to overcome us.

In the story Jesus does what God does – defeats the power of evil. This is also true of the other 2 stories in this section. Out of a situation of chaos order is restored.

Faith and confidence begin the journey to restoration of life and healing.

Reflection

Some years ago I was lucky enough to visit Tiberius as part of a biblical studies tour. We stayed there for four days which included two trips out onto the lake of Galilee, the second on the last day of our stay. We set out not long before dusk intending to celebrate Mass and dinner on board. It had been a beautiful day and Lake Galilee was at its picturesque best. The sea was like glass – a mirror of the beautiful hills surrounding the lake. As we got into the middle of the lake the wind began to pick up and the sea became choppy. The boat rocked from side to side. With daylight diminishing we lost our sense of where we were. All we knew was that we were a long way from the shore and things were getting worse. Fear and uncertainty began to make themselves felt. We began to think that we wouldn’t make it back to shore safely. Many of us remembered the story Mark tells in this Sunday’s Gospel. Fortunately, we had Jesus with us in the form of the local man who was our captain and who took us safely back to shore. As we approached the shore the wind dropped and the sea became calm once again. The captain made fun of our fear, telling us that we had no need to be afraid – these kinds of storms happened all the time. But most of us were only too happy to have our feet on dry land again.

Vulnerability is an uncomfortable experience. Many of our ‘boats’ and those of our loved ones have been tossed about on the turbulent seas of Coronavirus over the last 18 months. Many of us know exactly the kind of fear and uncertainty that the disciples felt as they were tossed about in the darkness on the stormy lake in this Sunday’s Gospel.

Last Sunday Mark used two parables to talk about the reality of the Kingdom. Now he begins to talk about the mystery of the Kingdom present in Jesus. It’s not about an awesome naked display of power. Mark’s story makes it clear that Jesus’ power saves, calms and overcomes chaos.

It would have been a powerful story of reassurance for Mark’s persecuted communities who must have felt like boats tossed about on the sea of life with Jesus asleep, because they did not feel the divine power saving them from persecution.

The disciples’ question is ours, too. Who is Jesus for us? A magician, a wonder-worker, or a person who found the way to let the reign of God’s grace out of his heart and into the lives of those around him? That’s the challenge for us, too.