

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost



24 June 2018

Job 38:1-11

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Mark 4:35-41

I remember many years ago, in the Theological College Chapel in Edinburgh, one of the Scottish Bishops came to speak to us about spirituality. It is amazing that I still remember what he said, but I do. "What is our great spiritual gift as Episcopalians? What marks us out?" he asked. "We are disciplined, but the Protestant Puritans are much more so. We are prayerful, but the Orthodox are deeper and more mystical. We are sacrificial, but the Romans give up more than we do to serve as priests. What then do we have? What is it that Anglicans do best? I tell you what we do best," he said, "We endure! Through upheavals, wars, and tempests, through division, argument and sheer neglect, we endure." And then he summed his argument up in some words I have never forgotten. "When you are priests in parishes that's what you have to do. You just 'hey to peg on until ye peg oot!'" Now that may not seem the most joyful message in the world, but it gave me strength because I thought, well even I can do that! I can endure for God.

Today in the Gospel reading we have the wonderful image of Jesus asleep in the boat while the disciples face the storm in fear and trembling. I was in a boat in a storm once. I was only 15 or so, and some friends and I had hired a big flat-bottomed motor boat with a big fly bridge. We were cruising around the shores of the West of Scotland. None of us had any idea about boats, and when the weather got bad we were in a pretty precarious place. The sea and the wind got so high we were terrified to turn round in case the flat-bottomed boat would be capsized when it got side-on to the big 15 or 20 foot waves. It was like being on a roller coaster. As long as we were heading into the swell the boat was OK, but as soon as we began to turn across it the boat began to roll. I remember sitting on the top deck and feeling like a tiny cork floating on the unimaginable deep. Suddenly you feel the vast power of the sea beneath you and become a tiny, powerless, insignificant speck of fearful humanity.

That sense of being at the mercy of huge and overwhelming forces; That sense of not being able to do anything about a situation; That sense of being about to be swallowed up at any moment is a feeling we have all known. The storms of life are many and various and we have all had to weather them. Life can be going along very nicely when suddenly something happens that threatens to turn us upside down and break everything to pieces.

It might be the storm in a relationship or a marriage, like a woman I once knew whose husband one day left her with three young children. She told me that she sat in a chair without being able to move for three hours. The world seems to be stable and secure, then suddenly it can all disintegrate and fall to pieces in a moment, broken by waves of isolation and anger and confusion.

It might be a storm in our job or career where everything we had hoped for and half expected suddenly doesn't look like it is going to happen after all. Like the young man I knew who had to sell his whole interest in a business for next to nothing because his partner had forged an investor's signature to speed up a legitimate transaction. He wasn't stealing but, of course, you just can't do that. The price for not going to the police was forfeiting the whole company. A storm like that can make everything we've worked for over the years suddenly disappear in a puff of smoke. Maybe it is the storm is a sudden illness or diagnosis, or the sudden loss of someone we love. The steady world we have got so used to is thrown into utter confusion. There are many ways that the storm can strike us, and I don't believe that there is anyone who hasn't known the sense of fear and panic that the disciples felt in that boat when the uncertain or the unimagined or the unexpected strikes.

The disciples, of course, have Jesus in the boat with them. They wake him up, and he calms the storm. But he tells them off at the same time. "Where's your faith?" he asks after he has calmed the storm. Why does he say this? It doesn't seem all that unreasonable for the disciples to be panicking. The boat looked like it was sinking. They all might be about to die.

Jesus brings calm with him because, in his presence, only that which God allows to happen can happen. Once you have put everything in God's hands and you are doing everything you can do, then all that is left is to face what's coming with courage and the faith that God will bring you through whatever lies ahead. If we turn to him and wake him in our hearts, Jesus will calm the storm in us, whatever the cause. This is the calm that endures. It comes through in that most lyrical of passages from Saint Paul in this morning's Epistle. Here is a real hymn to the virtue of endurance if ever there was one.

"We have commended ourselves through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute."

Saint John Chrysostom also raises a great hymn of praise to this virtue of endurance. He calls endurance "the root of all goods, the mother of piety, the fruit that never withers, a fortress that is never taken, a harbor that knows no storms." It is "the queen of virtues, the foundation of right actions, peace in war, calm in tempest, and security in plots." Endurance is "the courageous and triumphant ability to pass the breaking-point and not to break, and always to greet the unseen with a cheer." Endurance "is the alchemy which transmutes tribulation into strength and glory."

The disciples have to work hard to save the boat as best they can, and we have to do all we can to deal with the storms in which we find ourselves in our lives. Faith does not mean sitting back and saying, "O well. If it's meant to be, it's meant to be." But it does mean that, once we have done everything we can, then we can trust and know that Jesus is there with us, and what must be faced can be faced in the knowledge that God holds us all in his hands. It is this knowledge that enables us to endure; that enables us "to peg on until we peg out," not with grim stoicism, but with the hope that conquers all that the world can throw at us.

We stand, as Saint Paul says, "with hearts wide open" to the joy and glory of God's Kingdom that is not

yet, but that will be. "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see ~ we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

Today's Gospel illustrates what makes such a brave and hopeful and resilient way of Christian living possible. We can be the soul that Walt Whitman speaks of in his poem, "Passage to India."

*Sail forth – steer for the deep waters only,
Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.*

*O my brave soul!
O farther farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail!*

The seas of Life are the seas of God. And so we may sail them bravely, knowing that we do not sail them alone.

Amen.



CHRIST CHURCH GEORGETOWN

31st and O Streets, NW
Washington, DC 20007 | 202.333.6677
www.christchurchgeorgetown.org
info@christchurchgeorgetown.org

The Rev. Timothy A. R. Cole, Rector
The Rev. Elizabeth F. Keeler, Asst. to the Rector
The Rev. Elizabeth B. Gardner, Asst. to the Rector
The Rev. Nicholas J. Evancho, Deacon & Seminarian