

Sermon – St Peter’s Brighton Beach – 13 August 2023

‘Jesus Calms the Storm’ – Fr Chester Lord

This morning’s gospel reading mentions an important word: Immediately. *“Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.”* Immediately they are sent across the Sea of Galilee.

I point this out because I think that this word is an important part of this story, and because it reminds us of how life actually works. A lot of the major changes in our life, both positive or negative, often happen immediately too.

It can be a good thing – when you learn that you got into a university of your choice, becoming married or when a family member calls you with exciting news. These are life-changing events, and even though they are positive, they happen immediately. And immediately, our life is changed.

These can also be unwelcome events, of course, that happen immediately – like an illness or accident, or the passing of a loved one. Or even our recently experienced pandemic. Not too long ago, we had never even heard of COVID-19. And then, almost immediately, it seems to have taken over our world and our lives. Life often happens that way.

In the case of the disciples in Matthew’s account, they find themselves, almost immediately after the miracle of the loaves and fish, on a boat being battered by the waves, far from shore, with the wind threatening them.

And we have all been there. We have all been caught in one of life’s storms, being seemingly ambushed by circumstances beyond our control, far from the safety of land, with the wind and seemingly everything else against us.

We all get our turn in this proverbial boat, usually when we least expect it. None of us gets through this life completely un-exposed and unscathed.

And quite frequently these storms come at us immediately, without any prior warning. When they do, it is worth remembering this story which teaches us something valuable about our Christian life.

Jesus is with us. We are never alone in that boat. God's Son, our Lord and Saviour, is always with us. That is his promise. He may not immediately calm every storm, but he is most certainly with us in the midst of every single one of them. He is with us in the storm; he is with us on the boat. When in our life we feel battered by the waves, and far from the safety of land, with the wind blowing strongly against us, that is when we can be assured that Jesus is with us.

The disciples, though, are not immediately comforted by Jesus's initial words. In fact, we read that they are terrified. And so they cry out in fear. And that is exactly when the word "immediately" shows us again. The disciples cried out in fear, and immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." At first when they witness Jesus walking upon the water, they think it is a ghost.

And I think there is an important teaching here about prayer. When life's storms hit, we can cry out to the Lord in fear, and the Lord will immediately answer that prayer. Being afraid doesn't mean that we don't have faith. There is nothing wrong with being afraid. Our Lord wants to hear from us when we are afraid. Cry out in fear when life's storm hits, but make it a prayer. Cry out to the Lord, and he will immediately answer your prayer. Take heart, Jesus says. It is I. Do not be afraid.

But that is not the end of the tale. Because now enters our favourite disciple, Peter. In response to seeing Jesus walking on the water, Peter makes a very strange request. "Lord," he says, "if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." So, Jesus obliges, saying

simply: “Come.” Peter gets out of the boat, and starts walking on the water toward Jesus! And Peter seems to do this very well, until he notices the storm. Then he becomes frightened and starts to sink.

Now, the storm was there the whole time. So was the water. And so was Jesus. So the question is, what changed? It’s Peter’s faith. That’s the only thing that changed. He began to doubt. He took his eyes off of Jesus. He looked at the storm all around him, at the wind above him, at the water below him, and he became frightened and began to sink.

Perhaps you’ve had those moments, too. I know that I have. Occasions when you’ve taken your eyes off of Jesus. Looked around at the approaching storms in your lives, and started to doubt. If so, remember what happens next, because we get one more use of the word, “immediately.” Peter, in a panic, cries out: “Lord, save me!” And Jesus does. Immediately. He immediately reaches out his hand and catches Peter. No rebuke, no punishment. He catches Peter the moment he cries out to Jesus.

This is important, because sometimes, when we are in the midst of those storms, and forget our faith, we can feel a little ashamed, and our guilt can sometimes keep us from crying out to Jesus for assistance. However, Jesus wants us to cry out for help whenever we require it.

After he catches us, he may well confront us about our lack of faith, just as he does with Peter. But not before. It is only after he catches Peter that he says to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

So, if your boat is a little battered right now, take heart. If you feel far away from the safety of land, do not be afraid. And if you have taken your eyes off of Jesus, open up those same eyes of faith and see Jesus with you in the midst of that storm. Because he is. He always is. Jesus is with you, on the boat, in the storm, and when you feel like you might be drowning, Jesus is there.

This morning's gospel reading is a simple story, really, but one that I think we all need to hear right now, because it reminds us of this simple, glorious truth: that Jesus is with us in the midst of the storms. We can prepare for some of life's storms. They don't all hit immediately and unexpectedly. But many of the storms of life unfortunately do hit immediately. And when they do, it is good to recall this story.

It is no wonder that when all of this was said and done, those in the boat worshiped Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." That is why we worship after all. To take a moment in the midst of our journey through life, to gather on this little boat called faith, and to worship the one who promises to be with us through every storm.

Amen.