

## Reflection Notes – 13/8/17

- Geoff Stevenson

### When the Sea Threatens, Will We Find Faith?

Have you ever looked down into deep water? I remember standing on the top deck of a cruise ship in the Pacific. There was nothing around but endless water and sky. There was no sign of other life beyond that in the ship. When the sun blazed and the breeze was light the water reflected the light and looked inviting and cooling. On an occasion when the greys grew grey and the wind blew up, rain threatened and the sea began to roll. 'Frolicsome,' I think the captain suggested as the ship rolled and rocked on the growing swell. Walking along the decks became more difficult and people's stomachs lurched – there were fewer people gathering around meals.

I stood for a bit on the top deck and looked down into the dark, cold water. Gone was the friendly, gentle and inviting persona of the sea. In its place was a lurking, threatening violence. Reflected in the depths was danger and warning, threat and the cold, raw power of the sea. This sea was like another world, with its own deep powers and violence. It is a place that I do not belong. Sailing over the surface is wonderful, especially if it is in relative comfort. In fact it is exhilarating and feels renewing, like being in a wilderness where the world closes in. The realities of the world fade and whilst there are people around, I can withdraw and have no news of the wider world. There is minimal contact with the outside world and I am left alone with myself and my own life's hopes, fears and search for meaning.

When the wind blows up, however, there is another side to the quiet, Pacific Ocean and doesn't seem so *pacific* or kind. There is the lurking threat, the warning that there is power here I cannot control. I imagine what it might be like to fall into this sea and flounder amidst the waves that rock, roll, twist and rush past with the rapid currents. I wonder what it would be like to feel the pull of the ocean dragging me this or that way and probably down into the depths where humans cannot and do not survive. I imagine myself small, helpless and at the mercy of these alien powers to do with me what they will. It is a scary thought to imagine and I am glad to be standing on this solid structure high above the waves and I trust that it will endure these winds and waves and lead me into calmer, gentler waters and life preserved but more aware of my own vulnerability, dependence upon powers beyond my control or even capacity to truly understand.

This image of being on the sea in a storm has been used in many ways to imagine the struggles of our lives. We feel 'all at sea' or caught in the turbulence and storms of life. We are 'blown off course' or caught in the raging waters of change or crisis. As I look into these deep dark waters they reflect the harsh side of life, the stresses, challenges and threats that sometimes overwhelm me. When I am caught in crises I am thrown off balance. I feel pushed and propelled in all directions under forces that seem beyond me and sometimes beyond life. I feel like a small vessel in a huge, mountainous sea that threatens my very existence. I am small and vulnerable, weak before the strength of mysterious powers that rock life or threaten stability and well-being. Sometimes there are forces within our bodies that generate illness in ways that seem foreign and dangerous, waging war against our very being. Sometimes the crisis arises between people who stand

against one another and the conflict escalates and builds into something that draws others into its insatiable vortex. Sometimes the powers of the world wage war on the vulnerable and powerless, the little ones of the earth, and I feel caught in the helplessness to defend justice and protect the vulnerable. Anger and rage rises within me but I am still helpless to change or stand against such power alone.

Life is filled with the very dangers and uncertainties that threaten each of us in profound or more moderate ways. Life has implicit dangers and risks and we sometimes find ourselves in the raging waves or turbulent seas being pushed and pulled through grief, shame, illness, unemployment, conflict, injustice, violence, abuse and the ensuing confusion and disillusionment. Life is a very small boat on a very big sea, often at the whim of forces we cannot see and do not fully understand.

This week's Gospel reading (Matthew 14:22-33) holds this powerful image before us. This story comes after Jesus engaged a large crowd and sharing in the food of body, mind and spirit that flows from the Reign of God, giving life and hope through God's inclusive community of love and grace. He sent the people away to their homes and then the disciples were dispatched to cross the lake ('Sea' of Galilee) while he went into the mountains to pray. Through the night a storm blew up as is common on the lake. The little boat of the disciples began to be thrown around in the waves. The winds and waves threatened the life of these disciples crossing the sea to engage the dangerous and foreign world beyond their region and side of the lake. They were venturing into an unknown mission field 'across the lake' – on the other side of life.

When we walk in the way of Jesus, the way of love and justice, we will face storms and resistance from the powers that be, the status quo who will fight for all their worth. When we reach out to love and offer care of challenge for justice there comes a point where it is all too much for the powers that be because their very existence is threatened or challenged and they no longer remain quiet or passive. Think of people like Martin Luther King Jr who stood for truth, justice and love but was resisted by the powers that be until they killed him and threatened the movement. There are many other examples of people standing for truth or justice or reaching out in love and grace to people in crisis or who are vulnerable and find themselves resisted, rejected and in conflict with raging powers of the world around, a status quo that is fighting back – the Empire strikes back!

In this little story of Matthew, Jesus wanders across to the disciples in their boat and engenders more fear and confusion as they think him a ghost. He calls to them from beyond the waves and wind, beyond the boat and they are amazed for the presence of Jesus comes to them in the midst of this crisis. Peter asks if he should come to Jesus and he is invited to get out and 'Come!' Peter takes a step or two and then hears wind and waves, the power of the forces acting upon the boat and his fear overwhelms him and he begins to sink. O how we sink as fear, tiredness, frustration and hopelessness overwhelm us. We sink into the mire of despair or depression. We sink beneath the waves and feel we are drowning. Jesus reached out to Peter and held his arm. They got into the boat and all was calm. The powers that threatened the boat no longer had power or threatened the lives of the disciples. This Divine Presence brought calm and broke through fear, doubt and despair to open the space for belief as trust and the courage to persevere, to act and to walk with Jesus into the future that opens up before them. Will we trust this God?