

CCN Sunday St Michael and All Angels

Mark 4.35 - 41: Jesus speaks into the storm

This has been an extraordinary year, by any standards. Across the world, communities have been thrown into turmoil by the COVID pandemic. We have been tossed hither and thither, not knowing from where the next wave is going to come crashing over us, as we have tried to make our way through the wind and spray to the safety of a known harbour.

Today is CCN Sunday - the day when we celebrate the immense gift which God gave us in Coventry, the practical, lived experience of his reconciling love, which we now share with the world, through the Community of the Cross of Nails. We celebrate it today because it's the date of our patronal festival, St. Michael and All Angels - [a day when we thank God for his victory over evil, personified in the awesome sculpture of St. Michael gazing out on the world in implacable triumph on our East wall.]

It's a fact of life, that the greatest and most transforming experiences are never easy. They involve trauma and all the challenges of transition. They are experiences of journeying from one place to another, often physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. They will also be theological journeys, as our understanding of God and God's ways changes, and that too can be disorientating and disconcerting.

We are still in the middle of a tremendous journey. Unlike any other before, it's a journey which we are sharing with everyone across the planet. Are there people who have not been touched by the pandemic? Of the 193 countries in the world, by the end of July only 12 were declared Covid free, mostly Pacific islands. So what is this journey doing to us, and where might Coventry's story of reconciliation connect with it?

Perhaps the first thing to say is that we are frightened. Fear has stalked the earth, like the dread horsemen of the apocalypse. We don't know what to do with this experience, which confronts us in every face mask, in every sign that says keep away from your neighbours, in every locked church, or instruction not to sing in churches that are open. Fear greets us when we turn on the radio in the morning, or sit down in front of the news at night.

Many people have drawn a parallel with the two world wars, and especially the second world war - which we remember especially here in Coventry. Those wars were times of fear. Fear moves us: it can move us away from others, or towards them. It can move us away from God, or towards God. Fear can throw up walls around us, perhaps hotly defended ... or fear can cause us to open our arms and lives to one another in new and wonderful ways, knowing that only together can we face this new threat. We reach out and find one another in the dark - and as light dawns, we hang on to those new relationships.

Jesus did calm the storm - but the experience of being in that storm with him changed the disciples for ever. If they had not been in the storm with Jesus, their lives as disciples, their theology of who Jesus was, would have been less. Would they have chosen it? No, of course not - but did God use it - yes, for sure, God did. They would not have seen who Jesus was without it.

This is the repeated story of suffering and struggle for Christians, revealed most profoundly in the cross. Was the cross a tragedy? Yes it was. Did it open up the most profound and transforming encounter between God and the reality of the world? Yes it did? Would it have been better if it had not happened? Well ... that's not for us to say. It did happen, and something extraordinary and wonderful emerged from that tragedy.

This is the story of Coventry. We found ourselves at sea in a storm, with waves crashing around us, feeling abandoned by God, by Jesus Christ. But it turned out that God in Christ was very much with us here in our burning and burned out Cathedral, turning us back to himself and one another, sowing seeds for transformation. Many years ago I visited the redwood forests on the west coast of

America, and viewed the extraordinary sequoia trees, the largest living things on earth. Their tiny seeds lie dormant in the soil for decades before there is a forest fire, which is what's needed for them to germinate and begin to grow. Today, forest rangers manage controlled fires to encourage new growth. The seeds for new life here in Coventry were already sown in Provost Dick Howard's faith and theology, but it took the fire to see them burst into growth, and they have flourished into the worldwide Community which shelters us today.

Can this be the story of the pandemic? What good can emerge from these difficult times, which otherwise would never have come to light? Can we seek and find Jesus right in the midst of all that is still threatening to overwhelm us, to discover what we can see with the eyes of fear and faith about his Lordship, about how he calls us to trust him, about how he calls us to serve and follow him, in ways that we otherwise could never have known? Can we nurture and grow those new relationships that have flourished amongst us?

How is this going to change us? I've read that it was widely believed that Britain would emerge from the second world war a better place to live, a more equal and just society. If you like, as the 'kinder, gentler, more Christ-child kind of world' for which Provost Howard prayed. But it was not to be, or at least not at first. Despite huge advances such as the NHS, in other areas of society the inclusivity born of the shared challenges of the war soon gave way to the old petty rivalries and familiar prejudices of former times.

We are hoping and praying for an end to this time of trial. But as we do that in faith, we pray too that we may not forget the lessons we have learned, nor be left unchanged. May this truly be a new time for reconciliation to flourish amongst us, to share with one another, and with a wounded world. Can we take time to notice what's happened to us and around us, to maintain what's good and drop what's bad. It may be something small, like not travelling - or flying - so much. It may be greater, like learning who our neighbours are. Whichever it is, let's discover God in the journey. Then we may continue to know him at journey's end, returning home and discovering it to be a new place, to share with God and one another.