The battle of Jutland was, as we’ve heard, the largest naval battle in the First World War. It resulted in the loss of 14 British and 11 German ships, and the deaths of nearly 10,000 personnel. The damage inflicted on the British fleet was greater than that suffered by the Germans but the outcome is claimed as a British victory. The reason is that damage throughout the German fleet was widespread – whereas on the British side it was more or less confined to the battle-cruiser force, which had borne most of the fighting. The result was that the German fleet never again put to sea with the serious intention of engaging British naval forces.

And so here we are, one hundred years later, gathering to remember this low point in the history of the relationship between Britain and Germany. We gather in order to make sure that we do not forget what happened. We gather in order to strengthen our resolve to work at establishing and then maintaining good relationships with those who see the world differently from the way we do. We gather to celebrate bonds of friendship which soften disagreements and prevent disputes from turning violently toxic. We gather to reflect on the fact that in any decision which has a bearing on international relations, the key question is whether it brings us closer together or draws us further apart.

Earlier in this service, we heard Leading Cadet Meg Whitehall read Psalm 46. It’s a psalm that has sustained generations of people through times of crisis and difficulty – times when the gap between how things are and how they ought to be seems especially wide. Times such as one hundred years ago, for example. In an uncertain world, Psalm 46 invites us to draw close to the One we can turn to – even when the very worst happens.

‘God is our refuge and strength,’ we read, ‘an ever-present help in trouble.’ But doesn’t this seem a rather strange thing to say? Isn’t there a contradiction between the first word in this sentence, ‘God’, and the last word, ‘trouble’? How can the all-powerful God who we want to believe has our best interests at heart allow trouble to disrupt our lives – or even destroy them?

There’s no easy answer to this. It’s true that much less evil would happen in the world if God were to take away our human freedom of choice and over-ride all our bad decisions. But what we would lose as a result is, it seems, too high a price for him to want to pay, even in the light of events like the terrible battle that we commemorate today...

God’s strategy is not to stop bad things from happening – but to be with us as they happen and transform them from the inside. God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. The promise is that although we may be overwhelmed, he will never be overcome. He will never jump ship. He will never abandon us. He will never leave us.

This is the foundation on which the psalmist goes on to build his argument in verse 2: ‘Therefore we will not fear...’ Even though the most awful things happen to us and in the world around us. Even ‘though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea’ we will not be afraid. God gives us no guarantee that trouble will not happen. But he does promise us his presence as our refuge and strength within it.

This is what we find echoed in today’s Gospel reading, the account of when Jesus calmed a storm. Like many of the incidents we find in the life of Jesus, this is not setting out an agenda for what he undertakes to do with every storm in life. No, it’s a way of demonstrating the extent of his authority – “he commands even the winds and the water,
and they obey him” – and showing that even the very worst things which happen in our world will not have the last word.

But before he does that... he goes to sleep in the back of the boat. He might just as well not be there at all. His followers have the distinct impression that he doesn’t care and that, even if they were to wake him up and get him to show an interest, there’s nothing he’d be able to do – apart from join them in trying to bale out the water.

As we gather here this morning, it’s very likely that some of us are being shaken by one or other of the storms that life can throw at us. Maybe we nearly didn’t come today because of it. And in such situations, it’s very easy for us to join in with the disciples... Where is God in all this? Doesn’t he care? Why does he seem to be asleep? Why doesn’t he answer?

It’s a feeling that Luke’s first readers would have experienced too. Christianity in the first century is really tough. The Christian boat is being battered by the storms of persecution and is in danger of sinking. And yet Jesus is asleep! He doesn’t seem to be doing anything. He seems quite unconcerned, apparently quite content to let his followers suffer and even die.

What this story tells us, though, is that Jesus doesn’t stay in the uncontaminated splendour of heaven and just leave us to get on with it. No: he is a God who gets his hands dirty and his feet wet by entering our world as a human being. He sits alongside us, not handing down neat solutions on a silver tray but bringing comfort here and now and hope for the future.

The invitation to us is to demonstrate what was, for the first disciples, the missing ingredient. “Where is your faith?” Jesus asks them.

Imagine life as a pair of scales. We heap up all the evidence of God’s love and care on the one side. And we put all the things which suggest that he doesn’t really care for us on the other side. Faith is about the first side being heavier no matter what goes onto the other side. However terrible the things that happen, however dire the consequences of what might happen, faith maintains the conviction that God loves us, cares for us and will in the long run bring about the very best for us no matter what.

Where does faith like that come from? Well, there’s a clue back in the psalm: ‘Be still, and know that I am God!’ That’s one of the chief purposes of a building like this – to give people space and time to be still and discover God – the God who we in the Christian Faith have come to know through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ – the God who is with us, King of kings, Lord of lords, the one who stills storms and speaks peace into our lives. May we know him more clearly, and so love him more dearly and follow him more nearly, day by day. Amen.