Fear can be an all-invasive emotion. Sometimes those fears are grounded in reality such as going into an exam where we are not sure what questions we are going to be asked, going into hospital for an operation, receiving an unwanted or unexpected diagnosis, and so on. At other times our fears, real though they might be for us, have no rational explanation. A friend of mine has for years been terrified of flying. His wife had been fine until she married him but he managed even to make her afraid so that, for many years, they would only holiday in places they could reach by car. Despite all reassurances about the safety of planes over cars, they could not fly until they decided to take themselves in hand and go on a course to try and address it. Since then they have flown as far as the Canary Islands and are gradually getting better – though I’m not sure about the passengers around them who have to hear the conversation about what the various noises from the plane are!

Fear often comes when we are out of control – which, I think, is the case with my friends and their experience of flying. That presumably was what happened with these disciples. Some of you may well have visited Lake Galilee and gone out on boat into the middle of the lake and read this story whilst in the boat. Usually Lake Galilee is as smooth as a piece of glass but, apparently, storms such as the one described in our gospel reading do blow up from seemingly nowhere. So the disciples probably sailed out when the lake was calm and were just sitting or lying in the boat relaxing so much so that Jesus had fallen asleep – and we don’t hear very much about Jesus having downtime and sleeping in the gospels. All of a sudden, a storm blew up and the boat began to fill with water. We can imagine their sense of panic and of fear as they thought they might drown. Not surprising then that they shout to Jesus, ‘Master, Master, we are perishing’. Were they just waking him to be with them or did they have a sense that he might be able to do more – we don’t know but it seems that they just wanted him awake. Jesus rebukes the wind and the raging waves and calm is restored – but then he says to them ‘Where is your faith’ and we read that they were afraid and amazed as Jesus has command over the winds and the waves.

Jesus is with them through the storm and is able to bring them out of the other side to a place of calm and peace. Now we could glean from this story that Jesus is just someone we can turn to when things get sticky or dangerous but this story comes in Luke’s gospel just after the parable of the sower where we glean that it is the seed sown in fertile soil that grows and flourishes. And in the story just before this one, Jesus describes his family as those who hear God’s word and do it. So having faith is far more than just turning to Jesus in difficult situations – situations where we feel out of control – it is about a relationship of growing depth which we have to allow God to nurture and bless. It is about a deepening trust in the purposes of God, and through prayer and reading of the scripture beginning to align ourselves with the will and mind of God so that we know that God is with us through the storms but also through the calm places in our lives where it is so easy to assume control once more and forget about Him.

But it is often as we turn to God in the storms, that our faith grows as we learn to trust him not necessarily to take away those storms but to be with us and to bring us to a place of peace and of calm in the midst of the storm.

I spent eight years as Chaplain to Loughborough University and Colleges. One of the highlights of those years was spending time with some of the International Students who came across to the UK to study – often just for a year. One of those students was doing a Master’s degree in Library and Information services and he was what we could call, a self-supporting or non-stipendiary priest. His name is Hilary Adeba and he and his family had been driven out of their home in Southern Sudan and were living in a refugee camp in Khartoum. They were living in very poor conditions – his family of 6 were effectively living in one room but the Church was growing like topsy. The church
that he led, at that stage, 500 people in it and it had grown from virtually nothing. Hilary is now Bishop of Yei in the Southern Sudan.

It is often the case that the church grows in a place where there is struggle, hardship and persecution and it is perhaps because people have no control of their own and can only turn to God and trust in Him. The same is true in other parts of the world and I wonder whether it is our ability to be in control of our lives and our relative comfort that often get in the way of us developing our trust in God’s providence and provision for us.

In my previous role as Director of Ordinands, as I asked those coming forward for ordination to tell me their story, I noticed that often it was those places of difficulty – relationship breakdown, illness, failure of some sort – that had been formational in their faith journey. As we feel ourselves to be out of our depth, we turn to God, begin to trust more and depend on Him and as a result our faith grows and deepens.

And as our faith grows and our relationship with God deepens, we live acknowledging the presence of God in our lives. Jesus becomes a constant companion rather than someone we just turn to in times of storm and we know the empowering of God’s Holy Spirit as we seek to be the people God calls us to be. As we develop our relationship with God through prayer, worship and the reading of scripture, as we are open to listening to God as well as speaking, so we begin to be aligned to his purposes for his creation. We begin to see things as he sees them. The writer of the book of Revelation was caught up in a vision of God’s splendor and majesty which we heard about in our first reading. Such a vision of God transforms the way in which we see the world and one another. And so it is often the case that those who have dedicated themselves to prayer, those who have been through a time of suffering where they have been particularly close to God, can give us insight into God’s will and purpose.

Such a knowledge and relationship with God can help us to reframe, to see differently, situations that may seem difficult or impossible. And I think back to my time in parish ministry where I encountered people enduring the most horrendous illness who were such godly people with incredible insight and who radiated peace and a deep joy.

Faith in a God who is creator, redeemer and sustainer, is a journey which leads us through calm and storm but enables to see things from God’s perspective as the one who longs to bring healing and wholeness to us all.

Our readings for today begin to look towards the season of Lent and Lent is a time of penitence and of preparation. A time to reflect once more upon our lives and to look honestly at whether Jesus is Lord of our lives – or whether our desire for control gets in the way of that. May we use this time to repent and to grow in our faith, trusting God at all times and may that peace and calm of his presence be a witness to all those we meet.