

Mark 4 v 35-41

The first 34 verses of Mark chapter 4 are about parables: sowers and seeds, lamps and bushel-baskets and explanations. Now comes the action bit. Jesus has spent the day teaching to his disciples about faith and disappointingly, though perhaps predictably, when the opportunity comes to put what they have heard into practice, they demonstrate that they still have much to learn.

It's hard enough on dry land to keep your bearings when bad weather closes in: sailors, hillwalkers and pilots can still find it hard to know which way is up.

The disciples were experienced fishermen who should have experienced many such storms in their lifetimes, so perhaps we should be more surprised with their reaction of panic than we are. The disciples behave as though Jesus is the sailor, not them. Curious, isn't it?

Perhaps their reaction, their response if you like, is more to do with a developing conviction that he sorts everything out?

In the dark days of the Second World War, a group of Christian students in France kept in touch with some of their counterparts in England.

When Paris finally fell, they cabled the message across, knowing it would probably last for a while. Maintaining the Christian virtue of hope, however, they ended their message with: "Our God reigns!"

Sadly, the message got corrupted, perhaps in the translation – who knows - and it was received in England as, "Our God resigns"!

That's food for thought! Are there times in our lives when we think that God has resigned, given up, let us down?

Our Gospel reading for today gives us the image of the disciples in the boat thinking that Jesus had resigned, had given up on them in their great moment of danger. It is easy to fall into the trap of having a rather patronizing surprise at how fickle the disciples so often were: Peter, with his denials and often needing to be corrected; Thomas for voicing his misgivings and uncertainties; Judas and his betrayal; the sons of Zebedee and their squabbling for position. Today, the lack of faith of them all in the boat.

But what are we ourselves like? How often have we not fallen into similar notions? Don't we give voice to similar questions ourselves: What now? Why me? Where is God in all of this?

Are we too often inclined to believe that God resigns?

We need to be careful about being too hard on the fickle disciples.

At this stage, let me say that I think it is important to say that this apparent human frailty and fickleness is not something to be blamed and scorned: neither in the disciples nor in ourselves.

What we show in these situations is what is truly present in our hearts and that, after all, is what really matters. It goes in fact to the depth of our being. The sense of being abandoned by God is an acute one.

Fear keeps us from doing the kinds of risky things that may hurt or harm us.

But fear also can keep us from fulfilling our potential, from standing up for what's right, or more importantly, from feeling secure and safe in the world or even in our own skin.

When fear goes into overdrive, all reason, knowledge, and trust go out the window. All we feel is mind-numbing, anxiety-producing, paralyzing terror.

Faith is born out of inner calm. Fear disrupts inner calm. It's hard to have faith when our trust-meter has flown off the charts.

Remember when you were young, or maybe even today, when you woke up from a particularly heart-stopping nightmare in a cold sweat, heart pounding, hands clammy, a feeling of dread, your mind still in fight-and-flight mode, even upon waking? Or maybe when you've watched a gripping thriller on tv and you've sunk down into your seat, peeking at the screen with your fingers over your eyes, terrified out of your wits?

Those are moments when, no matter how strong your faith, your mind is focused on only one thing: fear.

Once our bodies hit the panic button, our inner alarms go off, and we are on high alert.

God may appear sometimes to not hear us, to be absent in times when we feel we need God most. When time goes on and things seem out of hand, when the days go long and the storms don't stop, it can feel sometimes like God is quiet. Or worse, not there. That's when our faith can begin to slip and terror can set in.

If we can think for a moment of Jesus on the cross, and his heart-rending cry when he asks the question: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" So, Jesus knows what it is like for us.

He knows how difficult it can be sometimes, to hold onto His Promise when difficulties come our way in the shape of illness, bereavement, redundancy, divorce, financial reverses etc.

There certainly is a hint of rebuke in Jesus' response to the disciples: "Why are you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?"

More precisely, though these are words of assurance: I will not abandon you.

The response of the disciples is not a feeling of being told off, but of awe at Jesus.

The sense of God resigning, of abandoning us at the moment storms arise, is captured by the popular poem called Footprints. Its poignant message is that at precisely those moments when we believe that God has abandoned us, he in fact carries us. Let's listen to this poem together, which was written by Mary Stevenson.

Footprints in the Sand - The Poem

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the LORD.

Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.

For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one belonging to him, and the other to the LORD.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand.

He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints.

He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the LORD about it:

"LORD, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way.

But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints.

I don't understand why when

I needed you most you would leave me."

The LORD replied:

"My son, my precious child, I love you and I would never leave you.

During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

So how can we enjoy peace when all about us is in chaos?

Well, since Jesus said that He bequeathed His peace to us, let us see what kind of peace He was talking about. When the storm was raging, Jesus simply stood up and commanded the storm to cease. Peace was restored to the amazement of the bewildered disciples. They could only blurt out "What kind of man is this that even the storm obeys Him?"

The answer to that question was that Jesus was operating from a position of strength – the pedestal of peace.

In other words, peace in operation often translates into pure power to determine your own destiny. The peace of God transforms you into a victor over life's circumstances. It enables you to keep a cool head and respond, not react, to difficult situations. God's peace keeps you in control and enables you find the right answers and thus tackle whatever question might be being asked of you. While it is natural for chaos and turmoil to reign in the world, it is equally natural for us as Christians to impose God's peace on our situation.

This is because peace enables us to stay connected to God and to consequently walk in the supernatural.

The good news for us is that turmoil – be it physical, political, social, spiritual, psychological, need not move us. You see, God has promised us in His word that great peace to those that love the Lord; nothing shall move them.

So, whatever the world throws at us, we know that we have the solution in the word of God, which serves as our source and guarantor of peace. May God grant to us the courage and grace to confront our storms and say –Peace be still. Amen.