

Sea Sunday, St Columba, 13th July 2008, 15th Ordinary Sunday

Job 38:1, 4-11

Mark 4:35-41

Theme: Chaos – Life or Death?

It took my parents and me 6 weeks in a boat to get to NZ.

I was a very little girl, in a small ship, on a vast sea.

I left my beloved grandmother who I never saw again and came with my parents to the farthest part of the globe; 6 weeks sailing. I did not know where we were going, only that I had left my grandma behind, when I looked out from the small ship I could see nothing but water, deep indigo blue water. I was afraid. It was not exciting for me, I was sad, I was afraid; I did not know where I was going.

All of us who live in this island nation of Aotearoa-NZ have connections with the sea in some way:

Our forbears came here from over the sea

We came ourselves from some- place else over the sea

We live near the sea (no one in NZ lives very far from the sea)

We see the sea everyday

We swim and holiday by the sea...

Our coastline is larger than that of the continental USA.

Fishing is a major industry.

The Foreshore and Seabed are a national treasure and need to be protected by those with kaitiakitanga so our food supplies and waters are safe for future generations.

It is important for us to come to terms with this sea.

Does it connect us with the places our forebears called home, or

Does it separate us from these places?

Does it link us with the world or isolate us from it? Are we friends with it or afraid of it?

I think these are important questions to ask ourselves because we live in this island nation surrounded by sea.

For the Hebrew people of the First Testament, the sea was fearsome – as it was for me as a little child on that vast ocean. It was vast and for them unknown, unpredictable and uncontrollable. In the First Testament writings the image of the sea, the waters of the deep, is an image filled with fear and awe. This image crops up frequently:

In Genesis there is water and chaos at the time of creation,

God flooded the earth to destroy and Noah had to build a boat,

Jonah had a near-death experience in the belly of a whale.

The sea is an image for *chaos and possible death*.

Even in the reading that we heard from Mark, the writer is using the image of the fearsome sea when he paints for us the picture of the disciples and Jesus adrift, in the storm, in their fragile fishing boat and about to be swamped (though that ‘sea’ was an inland sea).

By contrast Jesus is fast asleep on a cushion in the stern.

In this little picture – of scared fishermen and the sleeping Jesus – Mark suggests to us that there is something different about this man Jesus, something confident – he has Jesus reassert God’s action and calm the sea. In this way, instead of the loss of life that his companions feared, life was rescued from disaster, from chaos.

‘Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?’ are the questions Jesus puts to his companions, and provokes them to think about their situation differently. Sure, they were in the midst of ‘chaos’, a storm at sea... but Jesus challenges their pessimism, their certainty that there was no way out of this chaos.

It is an attitudinal shift that is being signalled here. Jesus does not follow tradition and accept the inherited mindset that comes, without thinking, into play in times of uncertainty or uncontrollable situations like a storm at sea (the dramatic image of pending death).

When all seems chaotic, with no way out except death, Jesus asks a silly question, “what are you afraid of?” He wants more thoughtfulness from his friends about their responses to their experience, to the chaos.

Last weekend, in dreary wet weather, there was a march in South Auckland against violence. (It was an indication of how afraid we are becoming.) Preceding every election there is something similar that focuses on our fear of the people we live amongst, and we are stirred up to demand harsher penalties, and stricter laws, and more police, as the climate of fear is racked up another notch... This year racial tension was added to the mix – and we wonder what is happening in this country. We are told the world is becoming more and more violent, more and more uncontrollable; so, it is suggested, we need harsher penalties, more laws, vigilantes and gated communities, and even guns perhaps, to keep the chaos at bay. Even though current statistics do not always back up the escalating fear, as in this recent situation, we rightly feel affronted at the inhumanity of the violence inflicted one to another.

But Jesus, talking to his friends in the boat in the storm says... *do not be afraid of chaos ...do not fear you will be overwhelmed...* that’s provocative. Our minds are stretched; our entrenched attitudes are challenged by such a question, because we, like those disciples, are afraid of what we can’t control! We want to be safe.

We are challenged about our attitude toward chaos around us.

Is our attitude positive or negative; is it one that focuses on life or on death; ka ora or ka mate?

Do we live anticipating we will be overwhelmed by the uncontrollable at any moment?
or do we live anticipating all will be well?

Try as we might to control chaos, to control our world, we will eventually have to face the same challenge as Job received from God, “*Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth... do you know who shut the doors of the sea when it burst out from the womb?*”

In the imagery of Job and the opening chapters of Genesis, it is God’s creative energy that turns the waters of chaos into life and brings forth dry land and living creatures.

The Mark story reminds us of this, and challenges us to think positively about our world as people of faith.

We will all need to answer the question for ourselves at some time – whether we want to live in a climate of fear, always anticipating chaos will overwhelm us;
or whether we will live as partners with creation, knowing that the creative energy of God will bring new opportunities from seeming chaos.

We cannot control the world we live in any more than we can control the sea – but we can respect it and be positive about it.

Our attitude to the events around us will demonstrate to those who watch us how we respond we have made to the invitation ‘I set before you life and death, be not be afraid, choose life.’

I think it is worth a try even if we can’t control everything!

Sea Sunday set me thinking about the sea and the place it holds in my experience and imagination.

I think of the sailors who spent months at a time away from their families and live in awful conditions onboard ships spending weeks at sea at a time and when they do come into port, frequently for only 24hours at a time, they cannot speak the language.

How can I connect with this?