

## That Sinking Feeling

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 10 August 2014, by David Gill. The readings were Genesis 37:1-4,12-28, Romans 10:5-15, St Matthew 14:22-33.*

In the early hours of Boxing Day 2004, an earthquake occurred off the coast of Sumatra. Nothing unusual about that -- earthquakes are regular events in and around the islands of Indonesia. This one, however, turned out to be special.

It produced one of the most deadly natural disasters in recorded history. The resulting tsunami took the lives of some 280,000 people in 14 countries around the Indian Ocean, especially Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand.

Remember those terrible TV pictures? The people? The devastation? All of us were shaken. Shaken by the loss of life. Shaken by the grief of the survivors. And shaken too by something else: the terrifying power of the sea.

We were reminded, in the most painful way possible, that the ocean is not just a playground to enjoy, during a day at the beach with the kids. It does not always stick to the rules, stay within its bounds, behave as we expect. The ocean can be dangerous, unpredictable, frightening. And it is, always, far beyond human control.

With that recognition, and without knowing it, we were thinking very much like the people about whom the bible was written. They were uncomfortable with large bodies of water, even lakes like the Sea of Galilee. Yes, they used boats, for fishing and some travel, but not in a big way. The Jews were a desert people, not a maritime nation. Theirs was not a surfing culture.

The sea, for them, was dangerous, threatening. Evil lurked there. [Remember the story of Jesus exorcising demons from a demoniac and into a passing herd of pigs. Where did those pigs then rush? Down into a lake, where the demons would be at home!]. The sea was wild, a place of strange creatures and mysterious powers, the part of creation where God's rule seemed most remote, most challenged. No wonder the book of Revelation, with its vision of God's final victory, stipulates that there will be no more sea.

No wonder, either, that the sea appears at several key moments in the Jesus drama. Back in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter, for example, Matthew's gospel had Jesus calming another storm and reassuring his demoralised disciples. That episode ended with the question: "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?"

Today's passage, six chapters later, is similar. A storm-battered boat. Jesus walking to them on the sea: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid". Peter attempting the same, failing and being rescued. The wind ceasing. Then the climax. It's not a question, as we heard in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter ["What sort of man is this?"], but faith's answer to that question: "Truly you are the Son of God".

Two stories about storms. Under the surface, however, a claim about a person. An extra-ordinary person. A person whose saving authority extends even to the sea, the seemingly most godforsaken area of human experience.

Storms come in many shapes and sizes. The tumult that was uppermost in the minds of those early Christians was the one that threatened to engulf them. Indeed, partly on the strength of these stories, a boat quickly became one of the symbols for the Church.

It was a stormy time for followers of the man from Nazareth.

First, their numbers were few. Christians were small, scattered minorities and there was little to suggest they would ever be anything else. They must have felt very vulnerable. Even today, though monitored by the world's TV cameras and supported by international law, life for religious minorities can be precarious.

Second, they were already tasting persecution. Outside Rome, it had not yet become systematic, but some Christians had been imprisoned, others killed. The larger threat was there. Dark clouds were on the horizon. They sensed the storm was coming.

Third, Christians were divided. There were conflicts of faith. Would the Jesus movement remain essentially Jewish or should the doors be thrown open to everyone? How should they read their Hebrew bible: literally, or reinterpreted in the light of Christ? What weight should they give to Judaism's rules and society's customs? There were even some personality clashes. Imagine what this strife was doing to their morale.

Remembering our ancestors in the faith, then reflecting on the Church's situation today, the temptation is to say too quickly: Yep, we're in the same boat. Numbers problems, persecution, divisions among Christians – that's us.

Well, actually it's not us. There are some important differences.

Take the numbers issue.

Here in Australia Christians worry about our dwindling numbers. We remember the allegedly good old days, around the middle of the last century, when membership statistics were on the up and up, Sunday Schools burgeoned, youth groups thrived, new churches were being built, pronouncements by assemblies and synods had “influence” and church treasurers slept in peace knowing their budgets balanced.

Here at St Stephen’s we’re accustomed to old-timers coming back, recalling their memories and telling us of the days when Gordon Powell packed this place every week. Half a century later, things have changed. Not only at St Stephen’s, but throughout the so-called Christian countries of Europe and in North America as well.

But look at the big picture. Today, there are more than two billion Christians, constituting over 30% of the world’s population, and numbers are still on the up and up. Scattered we are. Fragile we may sometimes feel. But we’re hardly a small minority.

Whatever the lines on our graphs may be doing, we should not exaggerate their importance. To repeat something I said a few weeks ago: “Beware of becoming fixated on statistics and trends. Don’t get too depressed by apparent lack of success, or too excited about apparent success. Both are only *apparent*, both happen for complex reasons most of which are beyond our control, and both are transitory.”

Yes, the numbers interest us. But that’s all they are: numbers. We must keep reminding ourselves that the man of the cross calls his followers not to be prosperous, not even to be numerous, but to be faithful.

What about fear of persecution?

A couple of years ago, former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey hit the headlines with a dire warning that Christians in Britain were being vilified by the state, treated as bigots and sacked simply for expressing their beliefs. Complaints about victimisation have been heard in the United States, from right-wing Catholics as well as Protestant evangelicals worried about losing a few battles in that country’s current culture wars.

Even in Australia, you sometimes hear Christians muttering about religious persecution. Come Christmas, some shopping mall will cancel its nativity scene and delighted radio shock jocks will have a field day fuelling the popular outrage of listeners -- most of whom never go to church anyway! Every so

often the Church will lose one of the privileges it has enjoyed since the days of Christendom. More outrage. Sometimes religious groups will be ridiculed for stances on social issues that they haven't properly thought through. Outrage again. The churches are criticised, sometimes legitimately, but we don't like it so what's our reaction? Persecution, we cry.

But it's not. You want to see religious persecution? Look at the tragedy unfolding right now in Iraq, for Christians and other religious minorities alike. That's persecution. Remember what happened during China's cultural revolution. That was persecution too.

Of course, the distractions we face bother us. But that's all they are: minor distractions. Australian Christians should not trivialise the real persecution others are having to endure by magnifying what for us are little more than passing inconveniences.

And what about divisions among Christians?

Yes, we are divided, and sometimes our divisions seem set in concrete. That's the bad news. But the concrete, thank God, is cracking. That's the good news.

Last week Sydney learned of the death of Cardinal Edward Clancy, formerly archbishop of this archdiocese. Ted Clancy was a good man, a faithful priest and bishop, and – I think, slightly to his own surprise – an ecumenical leader. As chairman of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference he ushered his church into membership of the National Council of Churches in Australia. For the next six years he took an active part in the Council's work. On hearing of the cardinal's death, I dug out a letter he wrote to me, back in 2000, when he was hanging up his boots. It included these words:

*I found my time on the National Council of Churches challenging, and sometimes frustrating, but always stimulating and rewarding. I made many good friends. The more I got to know the other members, the more I came to appreciate and admire them. Especially did I appreciate their faith, their commitment, their sincerity and their openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. I experienced an authentic ecumenical outlook at all times. However passionate the views held, there was never any sign of small-mindedness, and there was always present that essential ecumenical ingredient, a sense of humour. The unity that God wills for us may still be a long way off, but I am quite sure that the Spirit is moving in the Council and that we are on the right track.*

Today, Sydney's Catholics are giving thanks for Ted Clancy's life and ministry. I think we should too, in our Prayers of the People. As we do, let's be grateful for the unity that, most wonderfully, is finding us.

So the world has changed, and with it the Church. The storms we face are not the same as those feared by early Christians.

But -- we're still in the same vulnerable boat! I mentioned how, long ago, a boat became a symbol representing the Church. It still is. When the World Council of Churches was formed, the logo it chose was a small boat, surrounded by big waves and empowered by, at its centre, a cross. My old church in Hong Kong has as its logo a Chinese junk, bearing that same cross.

So we're still in the same boat. Turbulence still threatens. It can be scary. And from time to time we too know that sinking feeling.

At such times, we should recall how today's gospel ends. Not with graphs and statistics. Not with exhortations to do more or organise better. Certainly not with despair.

But with a simple message: take heart, it is I, don't be afraid. And an enduring statement of the faith that holds us: truly, you are the Son of God. That conviction strengthened the confidence of Christians, then. It should strengthen ours, now.

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