

I don't know about you, but I have always held a fascination and fear of the sea and storms. For the first 18 years of my life I grew up by the sea in Cleethorpes. I have stood on the seashore when the winds have been so strong that I have been blown off my feet; two of my uncles repeatedly kept me spellbound with their stories of fighting ferocious storms whilst serving in the Humber lifeboat. To me the sea will always be a symbol of wild, untameable power brought home most vividly in more recent years with regular televised footage of natural disasters arising from hurricanes, tsunamis and floods.

Wild, uncontrollable, cruel, destructive, frenzied...just a few of the many adjectives associated with the sea today. Similarly, in general Jewish writing of the time the sea was usually described as a power of darkness and evil; the antithesis of the beautiful word made by the creator God. Indeed, this bruising storm is a recasting of the watery chaos from which creation is brought forth by God.

I've read that Matthew deliberately uses the story of the sea and the storm as an allegory of the world and its difficulties with the boat symbolising the church. The stilling of the storm to be taken as an illustration of what it means to follow Jesus and it brings home to us that our own discipleship requires faith in Jesus at all times, even in the midst of trial and turmoil.

I'm not sure, but remember many of the disciples with Jesus on that night were drawn from fishing families; they were professional seamen and yet they were absolutely petrified with a visceral fear of capsizing and being drowned. The danger was real, in present time and they feared for their lives. But Jesus was asleep; he was sleeping so soundly that even the noises and buffeting associated with a furious storm failed to disturb his sleep.

In their fear and desperation, the disciples turn to Jesus and wake him with cries for help, but Jesus responds not with a sympathetic assurance such as "There's nothing to be afraid of", rather more by way of a rebuke: "Oh you of little faith, why are you so afraid?"

It is our own faith or lack of faith which is the key element here - combined with our humanly fear. Which brings me to the question I had to ask myself some time ago which I want to share with you today: Are you ready to put your trust in Jesus and tell your faith story or are you afraid to do so?

All of us here today have a story to tell, it is the story of why we are in this church; it is the story of what makes us different from many other people; it is the story of how we came to faith and why we continue to hold that faith. But here's the rub, would you, if asked, be willing to come up here and tell your story?

I suspect not, and you would not be alone. Most people struggle to talk publicly about themselves, particularly when it comes to what is often thought of as our private or inner being, low self-esteem, anxiety, shyness, embarrassment. Ah, yes. Embarrassment.

When I was at the tender age of eighteen and just about to leave home my father took me aside and said "Son, I suppose I ought to tell you a little bit about the facts of life. Talk about being embarrassed. Both of us blushed slightly and I waited....and waited...and eventually he blurted out: "There are three things you should never discuss at a dinner party: sex, politics and religion". I shuffled my feet for a while, tried not to look into his eye and said, "Dad, what's a dinner party?"

Little did I know in future years, dinner parties would become an important feature of my life in Sunningdale. On one such occasion in the 90's, shortly after I'd started attending here regularly, I was a guest at a dinner party when someone started talking about their recent holiday exploring the ancient temples of Egypt and how interesting the story of the Egyptian religion and Gods was compared to the boring old church of England.

The hostess turned to me and asked why did I go to church every Sunday because I hadn't always done so? She asked when no one else was speaking and nine faces simultaneously turned in my direction. Let me turn the tables on you for a moment. How would you have answered? Would you have been tongue tied? Would you have been embarrassed? Would you be afraid of saying something which might have provoked an active discussion or even an argument? Or would you have been the person St. Paul had in mind in our first reading: "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so you may know how to answer everyone".

Well, let me tell you no amount of salt, never mind the glass of wine which I hastily gulped down was going to help me or get me off the hook. Full of grace? Rubbish. I simply bottled it, made some flippant remark and quickly changed the subject.

So, why was I so hesitant about describing my faith at that dinner party? With the full benefit of 20 20 hindsight, I think it was because I was afraid; I was unsure how to articulate my beliefs; in reality I hadn't really thought it through fully and I suppose I had insufficient faith to overcome my fear.

I think it was Billy Graham who first said: "Fear knocked on the door. Faith ensured it was not answered" and that really is the subplot behind the gospel passage. The disciples were in fear of their lives yet ultimately, imperfect and weak though it may have been, they turned in faith to Jesus to quell their fear. Jesus calmed the storm and assuaged their fear. That was the lesson that I learned from these passages, namely that in the most desperate of situations, at times of absolute fearfulness we must never let circumstances overcome our faith.

So, what about your own story? How would you have answered if you had been in my shoes at that dinner party? Or if not at the dinner party, what about if Rev Jon asked you immediately after this service? It's the same challenge that Jane and I were set in 2010 by the then Bishop of Reading when we attended a course he ran on preaching. The challenge? During the time it takes for a match to burn out, tell the story of your faith.

Oh, how I wished the match was a long fireplace match instead of this regular sized one. I was able, just, to gabble quickly enough to make a decent fist of the task, although those 9 dinner guests would probably have simply laughed at my effort. And to be honest, 15 years later I'm still working on it, but I would like to think that I would now answer something like this: [strike match]:

My faith is a gift of love from God which encourages me to daily learn how to live loved and share that love with others. Indeed, to love another person is to see the face of God and it is so wonderful to have been blessed by God in this way. [blow out match]

Amen