

Sermon on John 6: “It is I; do not be afraid.”

21 January 2018: 10 am Holy Communion, St Nicholas Church, Cuddington, Bucks

Readings: Eph 3.14-21; John 6.14-21

PRAYER.

Does it ever strike you as extraordinary how closely the highs and lows of life can sometimes coincide? Perhaps a breakthrough at work and a breakdown in a close relationship. Passing an exam and failing at a job interview. A new baby and a health scare. Plans for a great new adventure and the death of a loved one. We probably all know examples like this, whether among personal friends or from the news. You may recall last year’s stories about Caribbean holidays of a lifetime brought to a sudden end by hurricanes; they included the almost parable-like scene of Richard Branson and friends partying in the basement while Hurricane Irma completely devastated his luxury resort at Necker Island.

Exuberant highs and terrifying lows also coincide in our extraordinary story from this first half of John chapter 6. Jesus has just been teaching thousands of people in an isolated spot on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. His powerful and inspiring message culminated in the experience of Jesus feeding a large crowd with what seemed like the impossibly small offering of a boy rustled up by Philip and Andrew, both of whom were disciples from the nearby village of Bethsaida. The crowd’s giddy excitement about Jesus as a charismatic superstar seems tangible. It seems like he can do no wrong: Surely this is the promised prophet like Moses we have been waiting for; surely this is the time when he will become our leader and king. John 6.15 is one of the most remarkably explicit statements in the Gospels about the concrete political expectations which may have been widely associated with his identification as the Messiah: Jesus realized they wanted to take hold of him and make him their king.

There is perhaps a time in the life of most charismatic political leaders when superstar enthusiasms know no bounds. You may remember the messianic fervour surrounding President Obama’s first run for office in 2008, when hundreds of thousands of people greeted him like a rock star in Berlin and Chicago – and were captivated by his electrifying rhetoric. Even the normally sober and dignified Nobel committee rushed to bestow their Peace Prize on him before he had managed to do anything either good or bad – a judgement that in retrospect perhaps even sympathisers would regard as premature or questionable.

Britain of course is not immune from these sorts of things. Much of the media has treated Tony Blair as a failure and a figure of public disdain ever since he left office

over 10 years ago. So it's easy to forget the craze of popular enthusiasm on which he was swept into No. 10 to the ever-repeating beats of the tune "Things Can Only Get Better". Before long they didn't, of course, and somehow the gloss came off this particular Messiah.

Today we seem to inhabit a very different political culture: the era of Trump and Brexit is not only much rougher and less slick, but has made it much more difficult to rally around shared hopes and aspirations. France at least has had its superstar in Emmanuel Macron not so long ago, although his gloss is perhaps now more shiny abroad than at home. And here in the UK of course some opinion makers still cultivate the messianic prospects of Jeremy Corbyn, whose admiration for the politics of Venezuela did not deter thousands of romantics from mindlessly chanting his name at Glastonbury and Retro Labour events up and down the land.

Jesus takes a rather different approach to his own popularity. Just when you the social media gurus must be pressing him to maximise his celebrity status through tweetbots and "likes", Jesus decides it's time to withdraw. He pulls back from the circus of popularity and the racket of other people's agendas and expectations. While the disciples get back in the boat to cross over to the Galilean side of the lake, Jesus spends time alone on a mountainside in prayer.

Jesus understands very clearly that judging who you should be and what you should do by the measure of your social media likes is a pretty toxic way to blur your vision and ruin your freedom to be yourself and respond to who God calls you to be. Particularly whenever we need to process big events or big decisions in our lives, making space for quietness and prayer is crucial. The Gospels show this to be a constant reality in the life of Jesus.

Meanwhile the disciples are in trouble on the lake. It's dark and a storm has been brewing. Earlier that same day there was the dizzy and back-slapping exuberance of participating in the feeding of the 5000. Now, suddenly, that same evening they are alone and in the dark in dangerous weather and afraid for their lives. Here is clearly an experience of joyous thrill and naked terror in close proximity, like those I mentioned at the beginning.

At moments like that, when we are at a low point, we may ask if the previous sense of joy and fulfilment was ever actually real. When their life is suddenly under threat and in doubt, might the disciples be wondering what difference it would really make if Jesus were to become their king? These sorts of experiences have a way of relativizing all our other aspirations and certainties.

But there is also the fact that when we find ourselves in a dark spot the obstacles and troubles of life can be so overwhelming that we lose all sense of reality and perspective. We often can't see quite how close we are to being saved. Note the little phrase "when they had rowed about three or four miles" (v 19). The Greek phrase talks about 25 to 30 "stadia" – about 200 yards each. If you look at a map you can see that what the disciples fail to realize in the midst of the darkness and the storm: after covering three or four miles of rowing, they are in fact already very near their destination on the other shore.

Jesus calls out to them in the comforting words, "It's me – don't be afraid." In times of fear or despair there may be just one or two people in our lives whose presence and whose voice carries that sense of definitive reassurance – the sort of comfort that a little child receives from a parent's voice when she is stuck up a climbing frame or having a nightmare: I'm here, don't worry, it's me. This is how Jesus comforts the disciples.

And for his disciples the words of Jesus carry the authority not just of their teacher but of the close friend who in the gospel is always also the only begotten Son of God. The Greek literally reads "I am, do not be afraid" – and in that sense this is one of a number of famous "I am" statements on the lips of Jesus in this gospel. He says "I am" to the woman at the well in Samaria, and later in this chapter 6 begins a series of self-identifications that help believers understand who he is: I am the bread of life; the light of the world; the good Shepherd; the way, the truth and the life; before Abraham was, I am. But here his words of comfort are simply, "it is I, do not be afraid".

As you will see in verse 21, Jesus comes to them just when they are most desperate – and yet as soon as he comes to them they are immediately at their destination. In John's gospel it's not clear whether there is even time for Jesus to get into the boat before they get there.

The disciples know Jesus more intimately than any others in the story. More than anyone, they have had occasion to see and grasp that at our time of need God stands by to work in us and for us what our reading from Ephesians calls "immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine". Disciples are not spared the highs and lows of life – including the fear and grief they may bring. But we like them will find that in following Jesus we discover him to be present and close in what may seem like our darkest hour – when he calls out to us, "It is I; don't be afraid." And before we know it, he has brought us safely out of the storm to the other shore.

AMEN