

# *crossing to the other side*

a sermon preached on the

*fourth sunday after pentecost*

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at

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by fr david moore, vicar*

the lections: Job 38:1-11, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Mark 4:35-41

Some years ago, in Perth, I received a call to make a hospital visit to a man in his mid 60s. I was told that he was in the last stages of a virulent cancer – that he would not have long to live. His family wanted the funeral, when the time came, to be held at the parish church – and wanted me to meet him.

Entering his hospital room was a shock. The swish private room with a million-dollar view of the Swan River was full of equipment – and not just medical equipment. There was the computer, the fax machine, two telephones, landline and mobile – and the filing cabinet! There was death lurking in his eyes: but not in his behaviour. The whole time I was with him he was receiving and making phone calls, consulting his computer, and working through the pile of papers stacked up on his hospital bed tray table.

His entire demeanour bespoke of a man determined to remain in control: in complete denial of reality. I can still hear his voice, issuing commands to underlings over the phone, no doubt as he had been accustomed to doing all his life. There was no acknowledgement of the reality – the smell of which permeated that room.

Not surprisingly, his funeral – little more than a week after that bizarre hospital encounter – was a tragic affair, a charade of triumphalist dishonesty and superficiality. I felt very sorry for his family: denied the opportunity to do the necessary business of dying and death.

By the time we come to chapter four of Mark's gospel a great deal has already happened. Jesus' *evangelion* and its consequences are already very clear. Jesus' invitation to embrace the dawning 'kingdom of God' will involve a complete break with the status quo of both political and religious power. Jesus is offering liberation from the tyranny of the powers that thwart the fullness of life, offering a liberty which is 'the kingdom'. In today's story we see what's required in order to enter into the liberty of this kingdom: "Let us go across to the other side".<sup>1</sup>

It is *necessary* to make a crossing, to the 'other side'.

As we know from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Divine Presence has always been calling people to make a crossing, to some kind of other side. Adam and Eve are driven from a garden. Noah must survive the ordeal of flood. Abraham has to leave his home country and everything he values. Moses and his generation are driven away from the economic comfort of Egypt. And so it goes on and on throughout the Scriptures. The Divine Presence, the Spirit of the Living Christ, is still calling people to make a crossing, to the other side: to leave a known and familiar state or situation, to undergo the risky yet life-giving journey to the place as yet unknown, which is life!

To not make the necessary crossing is to get stuck – which amounts to spiritual stagnation, possibly even spiritual death. That is Jesus' emphatic charge against the spiritual leaders of his time. They are stuck: refusing to make the necessary crossing. This was the dreadful condition I met in that man's hospital room: the refusal to make the necessary crossing; the belligerent refusal to relinquish control and allow the Lord of life to take him to the other side.

During the crossing the disciples become terrified. They fear they will lose their lives. That they are fearful is understandable, humanly speaking. But their reaction is out of all

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 4:35

proportion to the facts of the situation. The storm is fierce, yes.<sup>2</sup> However, the Lord of Life is *with* them:<sup>3</sup> they are not in fact perishing. They are gripped with an irrational and overwhelming fear. Paradoxically, like those with demons in the first three chapters,<sup>4</sup> the disciples are also possessed. But their form of possession consists in being gripped by the idea that they are losing everything, when in fact they have everything they really need, the Divine Presence. In this morning's memorable words of St Paul: "having nothing, yet possessing everything".<sup>5</sup>

We may wonder, why do the disciples become so hysterical? Why do the religious leaders react so defensively and aggressively against Jesus, and almost the moment he begins his ministry?<sup>6</sup> It is always a sure sign that deep, and possibly repressed, fears and anxieties have been triggered when our reactions are out of all proportion to the situation. When we react instantaneously, perhaps even aggressively, we are likely to be in the grip of powerful forces deep within us. Like the religious leaders in the gospel, we have literally become possessed. Possessed by his attempts to control his life, the dying man in the fancy hospital bed refused to make the crossing to other side.

So the outer waves are in truth a sign of an inner reality. The outer storm is revealing an inner situation. In the midst of which the Lord of Life sees penetratingly into our hidden depths: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"<sup>7</sup>

The Greek text distinguishes between two very different kinds of fear. Jesus' blunt question exposes the kind of fear which is a form of possession, irrational and cowardly.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, 'great awe' speaks of reverential fear,<sup>9</sup> that feeling in the presence of the holiness of God so aptly expressed in the voice from the burning bush to Moses, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground";<sup>10</sup> and by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God".<sup>11</sup>

The first kind of fear is neurotic, timid, and backward looking – it is from this form of possession that the Divine Presence liberates us through the crossing over, to the other side, which is life. Crossing over to 'other side' sponsors that healthy and necessary reverence before the Divine Presence, who is always leading us out of possession and into the fullness of liberty and life.

And precisely when we are panicking, the Lord of Life still speaks to our inner turmoil: "Peace. Be still!"<sup>12</sup>

[vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au](mailto:vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au)

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 4:37

<sup>3</sup> Mark 4:38

<sup>4</sup> Mark 1:23-28,32-34, 3:11

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:10

<sup>6</sup> Mark 3:6

<sup>7</sup> Mark 4:40

<sup>8</sup> **δελουι** *deloi*, timid, cowardly

<sup>9</sup> **φοβον μεγαν** *phobon megan*, a terrible fear

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 3:5

<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 10:31

<sup>12</sup> Mark 4:39