

son of God, son of man

a sermon preached on the

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st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Job 38: 1-11; Psalm 107; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4: 35-41.

Looking for a starting point for this address I came across some words from a Dutch songwriter that are both penetrating and cynical:

The morning paper is staring me in the face
The headlines still the same
I guess my feelings changed
I see a picture of war
A child in pain
Questions in his eyes
But no one to explain
'Cause God is asleep
Leaving the world to our trust
God is asleep
And he has no time for us.

Margriet Eschuijs.

In this age that we live in of instant and abundant global communication we are all exposed to all manner of human suffering, whether caused by volcano, tsunami or warfare or the creeping genocide through famine and drought that stems from irresponsible government. We live on the brink of compassion fatigue – there is so much to care about, and so little we can do about it. And in exasperation some will cry out: Where is your God now? Then, as though in an embittered attempt to provide the answer themselves, they may mockingly muse aloud: Perhaps they say he is asleep.

It is a point of view that hardly stops short of the denial of God's very existence, akin to that of Nietzsche's madman who declares that *God is dead*. It is a notion that stems from a 'God'll fix it' image of the divine. It looks for a Wonder Worker who will prevent road accidents and premature deaths and all causes of personal suffering and grief. It looks for a Controller to ensure that the forces of nature are tamed and made manageable. It looks for a celestial Enforcer who will override the folly of leaders' intent of achieving their aims through violence, genocide and warfare. It is a view that is as old as the hills—and it is a view that does not even begin to grasp the reality of God.

In Mark's gospel reading for today we hear of Jesus calming a storm on the Lake of Galilee. His companions, Galilean disciples were men of the lake. They knew its waters so well, and they knew how treacherous it could be, for the Lake of Galilee is known to be subject to sudden squalls that can be highly dangerous. Yet, despite their knowledge of these waters, and whether through tiredness or complacency, they set out to ferry their leader across the lake. They run into a savage storm and their complacency and self-belief desert them. As the waves crash down upon their boat they panic and turn to Jesus who is *asleep* in the place of honour at the stern

of the boat. Jesus gets up and commands the winds to cease. As the waters become calm, he turns to the disciples and rebukes them for their fecklessness and lack of faith. The disciples are left bewildered and fearful of this man who exercises such power over the natural elements. And the question in their minds lingers on: *Who is this man, that even the wind and sea obey him? Who is this man?*

This is a strange story and, in order to understand it more fully, we need to recognise that the gospel in which it is set, Mark's gospel account, is a document of two halves. The first part of the gospel according to Mark makes much of Jesus the wonder worker. The story of the calming of the storm, like the healing of the man with an evil spirit, the raising of Jairus' daughter, and the feeding of the five thousand, portray a Jesus for whom all things are possible and who is prepared to demonstrate the power of God over the natural order of the world. And through it all the power of Jesus to achieve so much through faith is contrasted with the faithlessness of his disciples who are made to look ridiculously inept. The second part of Mark's gospel account focuses on Jesus the suffering Messiah. For, as we read further into the gospel. We get a quite different picture of Jesus through chapters 8 and 9 and all that leads to his crucifixion and death. Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus speaks of how he must suffer and die. The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus portrays Jesus as the glorified Son of God but this does not detract from the suffering which Jesus will embrace all the way to the cross.

There was a time, not so long ago when Bible scholars regarded the gospel according to Mark as both the earliest and most primitive of the gospels, a work written by the disciple John Mark, which records in clumsy Greek the spoken words of Simon Peter. Nowadays, a more complex picture has emerged. Mark's Gospel account is seen as the product of a dispute between different factions in the early church. There were those who projected a view of Christ as a 'divine man', endowed with miraculous powers and supernatural knowledge. Against this, those Christians in the tradition of Mark take the view that we cannot understand who Jesus is, and cannot therefore be his disciples, until we realise the centrality of suffering in his mission – and in ours. For we are all exhorted to take up our cross and follow Christ.

Mark's gospel account sets out the first view in the first half of the document, then imposes upon it the motif of suffering. The resulting synthesis is achieved by building the whole work around the idea of Jesus, the Son of God. The opening words of Mark's gospel account make this clear and the theme is reiterated at various points such as in chapter 8 where Jesus takes the title Son of Man and chapter 9 where the divine Voice proclaims Jesus 'my own dear Son'. There is a forging together of the Son of God and the Son of Man; and this is the essential purpose of Mark's gospel account. In a sense, the climax to the story is not the brief account of the resurrection but the acknowledgement by the Roman army officer who recognises in the crucified Jesus one who was truly the Son of God.

It is the genius of Mark's gospel account that it brings together the glory of the Son and the suffering of the man Jesus in the name of all humanity.

When the Galilean fisherman panicked, only to be rebuked for their lack of faith as the storm abated, they were left with that eternal question: *Who is this man?*

Mark's gospel account goes a long way to answering that question for those with the faith to see in the crucified Jesus the living and eternal Son of God – and in that same faith, to follow in his footsteps in today's complex world.