

Sea Sunday 10 July 22

Wairua tapu, welcome – be in this place and in these words spoken and heard. Amen

Growing up in New Zealand, as many of us here tonight, you're nowhere far from the sea. We are a few small islands – and so seafaring in all its guises – arises from our coastline where many of our cities were established with busy ports. So the sea is a means of transport, occupation and income, and a serious food source, - or provides a place for leisure with myriad activities on and in the sea, fishing cruising, yachting, swimming, all sorts of water sports – for competition or a way of cooling off on a hot summer's day.

But the sea as we know has many faces - yes it's beautiful, but also changeable and fearful. A power to be reckoned with - not to be taken lightly. Many of our forebears came here in sailing ship, or further back – waka – with all the risks that involved, in the worst-case shipwreck. And in our recent history, the day of the Wahine disaster is still etched in most of our minds. Even down in Christchurch I remember the forceful winds that day – not being able to ride my bike to school.

Shipwrecks and other disasters at sea were a recurrent theme in painting especially in the past few centuries. They demonstrated the primal force of the elements, a nightmare for all who travelled far from home, and of course for their families anxiously awaiting their return. I was going to focus tonight on WM Turner's 1805 painting of a shipwreck, but then it seemed too grim and hopeless - although very dramatic -there was no suggestion of rescue, salvation and protection – the hope of God's saving grace - as we heard in the Scripture readings today.

So I looked around walls of my own house- being a sea fiend myself from forebears who built ships, I knew there were a few works I could use for our reflection this evening. So here we have, firstly, a pen and ink work, nearly 130 years old, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic style with its grand and overpowering land and sea scape, where humanity is almost literally a drop in the ocean. The artist was my great grandmother's art tutor in Christchurch. I think the water here is actually one of the South Island lakes, given the proximity of the mountains - or it could be the Kaikoura coast.... Anyway if you look closely on the right you can see the little ship is heading for shipwreck, very close to the rocks. The title of the work is Moonlight. As I looked at it in terms of allegory, John's gospel chapter one came to mind: "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it – perhaps the artist intended that the appearance of Moonlight through the night clouds, might offer the captain of that ship the chance to narrowly avoid the rocks. Let's hope so.

And hope sustains our faith. Looking now at the next painting - the tugboat which a Karori friend of mine painted. As it didn't have a title, when I hung it in my hallway, I named it "Hope coming over the Horizon" It sums up to me Salvation, God's protection- guiding and ensuring safe passage. Don't you love the warm red colour of the tugboat, especially the contrast in this painting with the dark green perils of the deep. Often driving back to Karori along the motorway, I have to keep my eyes firmly on the road if the tugs are out – it's just delightful to see these little vessels one fore and aft of a huge ship guiding it through the harbour out to sea or back to port. It makes me think of Faith as a small as a mustard seed...the power and potential of small things which over often overlooked.

And the final work tonight is more obviously about God's protection. I was given this as a parting gift from Island Bay parish when I left in 2018...I watched this annual ritual, The Blessing of The Boats, several times when living there. It used to draw hundreds of spectators - so much for our faithless society. I love in this work the fanciful rendition of the priest and altar boys like angels and cherubs on a cloud. In reality, the priest went out on boat motoring around to bless the fishing boats that are still operational there, sprinkling or

spraying them with holy water, and a crowd of leisure craft would sail or paddle nearby to be part of the holy moment, to be blessed too. Maybe the hordes of spectators hoped for something like that too. I would have loved to participate in this ceremony in an official capacity -but didn't feel I could ask this of my Catholic counterpart in Island Bay who led it, as it was integral to the faithful catholic community there – with its many Italian fishermen.

I wonder if it's our innate knowledge of the power of the sea – and our hope that God's power over the wind and waves is greater - that make people hang on to a shred of faith – especially in the face of disaster. When I was the children and family's minister at St Mary's Karori I used to take a group of intermediate aged boys after school once a week – many from non-church homes, but their parents had agreed with the afterschool care which the parish ran that they could come over to the church. So, before getting stuck into the sausage rolls, we would recite the Lords' Prayer which I taught them – and which they were motivated to learn once I told them the true story of a friend who was drowning after his little boat capsized. And he prayed the only prayer he knew - the Lord's Prayer, and he lived to tell the tale ... They were impressed and learnt the Lord's Prayer pretty quickly. You never know when you might need it.

Today's Bible readings involve peril on the sea - a near shipwreck in Mark's gospel, and an actual one in the Book of Acts – chapter 27. The apostle Paul was a prisoner being transported in a ship. Somewhere off the coast of Malta they find themselves battered by a terrible storm, and an angel of God has appeared and told Paul not to be afraid and that God would save them. in the midst of the raging storm still driving them - they see they are close to land but also surf and rocks -, he tells his captors and crew a heartening thing: "None of you will lose a hair from your heads." (Acts 27:34) – The good news is, you are not going to die. The bad news is the boat that has been carrying you – the vessel that had taken you safely from port to port— the boat will be lost. They were not going to lose their lives, but they were going to lose the ship - and that is no small matter. Indeed this account ends with the ship breaking up and people swimming or clinging to the wreckage - verse 44 – "In this way everyone reached land in safety"

Paul's faith sustains him, but for us the question comes up...How to lose your ship without losing your soul? When our storms are brewing, actual or metaphorical external or internal, inevitably the question comes: Will I survive this?

And of course, there are many storms fierce enough to toss you, throw you, destabilize you, and scare you that do not result in shipwreck. Some storms last only for the night; some pockets of violent air are only turbulence. Just recently, I experienced the feeling of relief (and thankfulness) after an especially wobbly landing at Wellington airport. And I wondered how many of my fellow passengers resorted to praying, maybe for the first time...

And one thing to remember is that others may be caught up in the same storm or a similar storm. As one of our parishioners said she tried to remember this and not feel her suffering was all her own - did you note in the gospel reading it mentioned the other boats? I'm sure those aboard were feeling the same terror as the disciples.

And whether or not, the storm is an extreme weather event - in our times that may be a result of human induced climate change — or whether the storm originates in you — does not change the scope or scale or power of it. The storms that come will test us all, and it is entirely possible one comes to you that will end in your failure before the wind and waves recede. Our faith will be tested, and we may fail...

Both readings are about faith really – the disciples’ faith appeared to be lacking and Jesus lets them know. We know Peter at least did fail again - spectacularly, on the surface of things with his denial of Christ when the cock crowed, but perhaps, there was something at work in him that is deeper than his failure.

Through the storms of self a positive outcome is possible. Jesus says to Peter – in Luke’s Ch 22 “Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. (Luke 22:31-33)

And this may happen to us too - the tsunami may come, and take your self-reliance and your pride, among other more material things perhaps, but Jesus says, I have prayed for you... so that failure would not destroy your faith but deepen it and strengthen the faith of others. Ask Jesus to pray for us too in our time of pain, weakness and doubt.

While I would not recommend a shipwreck real or potential to anyone, any more than I would recommend cancer, car accidents, or a pandemic, there seems to be to a mysterious truth I have since heard over and over from people who have survived their own shipwrecks: On the other side, there can be a stronger, deeper, richer, more integrated life. While nobody would choose to lose the loved one all over again to the unexpected illness, or lose the job they trained for years to get, or lose the relationship they invested heart and soul in.

On the other side of the storm that tears you to pieces may arise a capacity to love without doubt, to live without fear, to be something infinitely more powerful than the person you were before it happened. And thank God, through his grace, transformation can take place -a Sea Change.

Because Jesus taught us himself that it is only in losing our lives — lives with their ego pretensions and posturing, in their careful image constructions - that this richer, deeper, below-the-surface life can be found. This is the life hidden with Christ in God, where almost anything can happen at the top of things without disrupting the grace that lies beneath. In the place in the where you can be cut off from your very self - at the end of your rope - cut off from everything you thought gave you meaning and purpose — only to find that nothing can separate you from the love of God.

- *Catherine Froud*