

Second Sunday before Lent 2022

Genesis 2.4b-9,15-end

Revelation 4

Luke 8.22-25

Where is your faith? he says to his disciples, who were as terrified as anyone would be in their circumstances. And the question has always been interpreted as a rhetorical one, the equivalent of the accusation “o ye of little faith”, which is what St Matthew has Jesus saying in his version of the same event. St Mark’s telling is slightly different again, in which Jesus asks “Do you still have no faith”?

But where Matthew and Mark write about faith in terms on *quantities*, Luke describes it in terms of *location*: *Where is your faith?* Now, there can be little doubt that the consensus view is the right one: despite the variation in precise wording, Luke means much the same thing as his co-evangelists do, and is here implying that the faith of the disciples is absent. But let us set aside authorial intention for a moment, and consider what it might mean for the disciples’ faith to be *misplaced* rather than simply insufficient. And to do

this, let us begin by observing where their faith was placed.

It seems obvious that their faith was in him—in Jesus—and in his ability and willingness to save them from their plight. And they were right, of course: Jesus could, and indeed did calm the storm, and bring them to safety. And not only were they right, but we are all encouraged to similarly have faith in Jesus and his saving power: the Church has exhorted us thus for centuries.

And yet, Jesus himself considered their faith misplaced, and this presents a puzzle, though admittedly probably one of my own making, having taken Luke's phrasing of the thing more seriously and more literally than he probably intended. But perhaps this interpretive foolishness will lead us somewhere interesting. Our next turn is to consider where else the disciples could have placed their faith.

They could have placed their faith in the *boat*, and its seaworthiness in a storm. This reminds me of the moment I developed a fear of flying, which was on a flight from Malaysia to New Zealand, which began with prayers played through the entertainment system

directly after the safety video, my immediate reaction to which was to wonder whether the engineers were leaving too much to divine providence. But it is unlikely that Jesus was trying to increase the disciples' confidence in yacht-building quality control.

They could have had faith in themselves—whether natural or supernatural—to get out of the situation in which they found themselves. This option is characteristic of our times, in a way, to the extent that individualism is the dominant social paradigm, even to the point that we are meant to pull ourselves up by our own spiritual bootstraps. But this view would also be foreign to Jesus, not to say antithetical to him. Furthermore, it is probably false that the disciples could have gotten themselves out of their predicament: and for us too, there are problems too big for us to solve, and Christian faith is not Pollyannaish about that.

Which brings us to a more theologically kosher answer to the question. The disciples could have had faith in God's providential care, and that despite all appearances to the contrary, they would be alright because God would not allow them to be harmed. Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind. But I am

disinclined to think so, also because it rests on false premises. It is not true that God will always protect them from harm. Certainly, if the legends are to be believed, then almost every one of Jesus's twelve apostles—presumably, the disciples in this story—were martyred: God did not save them from trouble in the end. And even if the legends are not to be believed, we know that at least Jesus was not himself spared from a violent end.

The fact that very bad things sometimes do happen to even very good Christians provide clues for us in our consideration of faith's proper placement. Both Jesus in Gethsemane and, later on, the disciples by the end of their lives, came to place their faith *not* in a happy ending worthy of a Disney major motion picture, in which they triumph over their enemies, but in God, come what may. This is faith as allegiance, rather than prediction: in God, rather than in any particular outcome. Perhaps this is the sense in which the disciples' faith was misplaced: their faith was in Jesus's ability and willingness to accomplish some particular end for them.

Make no mistake: it is a tall order to ask for faith untethered from any expectations or reassurances for

our well-being on this side of glory. Quite to the contrary: if we are promised any glory at all, it is in the baffling language of apocalyptic, the cryptic language of white robes and golden crowns and thrones of either emerald green or all the colours of the rainbow, or both at once. In contrast, the promises made to Christians in plain language tell of hard lives dedicated to fighting evil, wherever and whenever it might arise, including within ourselves. And these are battles—like all battles—for which victory is not assured for every individual, even if the gates of hell will be torn asunder in the end.

And so what if they won't be, actually? Not long after I became a Christian, a friend asked me if I would still throw my lot in with Jesus if I did not believe in any sort of afterlife, any assurance of eternal beatitude: and it was and is a very good question. There is a line about this in C. S. Lewis, in his posthumously published *Letters to Malcolm*, widely considered to be one of his weaker contributions, but one of my very favourites. Lewis imagines God telling him that there is indeed no heaven, no other side at all, let alone glory there. And he considers whether he would change sides even then, as there is still time to do so: but then remembers what he calls the Viking way: "The Giants

and Trolls win. Let us die on the right side, with Father Odin”. This is the Christian way too. Faith is not a wager; the odds are irrelevant, and there is no cost:benefit analysis to be run. The way of Jesus is not the easy way, but if it is the right way, then it is the way we must go.

And so, faith is being in the boat with Jesus, tossed though it is in tumult and tempest; and this is precisely where the disciples were, which ought to be reckoned to them as virtue and piety, even if it is accidental virtue and unintentional piety. More importantly, this is where they remained until their ends, when the imperial powers came for them too, armed with their violent unbelief. God help us, that we too may join them there.