

NKMC Worship at home Sunday 9 August 2020

Reflection

Certainty – can we live with it?

Aim: to encourage faith in the context of uncertainty

When VAR (video assistant referee) was introduced into top-flight world football in 2018, many hoped that it would put an end to the uncertainty around offside and penalty decisions. While it may well have cut out many bad decisions, supporters, particularly supporters of Crystal Palace like me, still feel aggrieved by the controversial decisions that don't go their way. VAR as one commentator puts it "complicates the very notion of what is 'right'. What is a handball? What is offside? What is 'clear and obvious'?" Ultimately, of what can we be certain?

We crave certainty in our lives: we don't welcome change. Right now, we want to return to what is familiar and in the case of our church life to be able to worship in accustomed ways and to engage socially with each other and those we serve.

Disruption of the status quo leaves us feeling very uncomfortable. Any sense of certainty we may have had about the shape of our lives has been dispelled by Covid-19. We now live in very uncertain times. The coronavirus pandemic has changed the way the world works. Everything about the way we lived together and interacted socially that we took for granted has been challenged.

It's not surprising given the events of the past 6 months that many people long as they put it 'to get back to normal'. Others perhaps more realistic about our ability to control the virus, speak about embracing what will become the 'new normal' where restrictions on what we do and how we do it will continue – perhaps for years to come.

Following the Government's relaxation of restrictions on places of worship many churches are contemplating reopening, but the continuing requirements for social distancing, wearing face masks and not singing hymns, among others, present real challenges not only about how to adapt our buildings but also in relation to what worship will be like.

And for churches dependent on lettings for a substantial part of their income the longer they remain closed their very survival is brought into question.

All this uncertainty can leave us feeling very alone and challenge our faith. Where is God in all this? And even if we are confident of our faith in God how's our walking on water? Will we take a few steps into the alien and hostile world of water and then realise what we're doing and fall in? Or can we embrace the uncertainty of life recognising that disruption to the status quo, can have benefits?

What does the gospel reading tell us that may help us to answer these questions?

The gospel story comes soon after Jesus has heard the awful news of John the Baptist's murder. We are told that on being given the news by the disciples Jesus withdrew by boat

to a private and solitary place - a reaction we may be familiar with when something terrible happens. We just need time alone to get our heads around it. But this didn't last for long. Crowds of people followed him and on coming ashore he puts his personal concerns to one side and as Matthew puts it "had compassion on them and healed their sick".

That evening having fed the 5000, dismissed the crowds and sent the disciples on ahead in the boat he withdraws again, this time up a mountain to spend time with God his Father no doubt seeking to make sense of it all. The death of his cousin would have been a great personal blow, but he was also concerned about the increasing pressure among the people following him to set him up at the head of a militia ready to march on Jerusalem. Maybe here's another temptation narrative: Jesus is seeking strength to keep faith to the purpose and destiny of his ministry in the face of the temptation to take a different route.

By contrast the disciples far from finding a quiet place or a smooth passage are plunged into battling with the elements on the lake. Storms can whip the shallow waters of the Sea of Galilee into steep short waves threatening to capsize a small boat. Coupled with the noise of the wind and discomfort of the motion of the boat it must have been a very bad night. Experienced sailors though they were, they would have been frightened and by the time dawn arrived surely exhausted.

Then as dawn breaks, they are confronted with the sight of Jesus striding out across the water. Not surprisingly they are terrified: is it a ghost? But far from being a ghost, Jesus shouts words of reassurance and comfort across the storm, 'It is I.' Mathew's use of this image and these words is deliberate and telling: it's to suggest that there is something in Jesus' identity that is beyond human for God in the Old Testament spoke as the 'I am', and to draw a strong allusion to the instances when God is pictured in the Old Testament as walking on or through the sea - the sea which represents the unknown, the uncertain.

Peter impulsive as ever replies immediately, speaking before thinking. 'Lord, if it is you' What did he mean? Was it, 'If, as you say, you're Jesus, then prove it - show you can make me walk on water, like you?' Or, 'since I can now see that you're not a ghost, but my Lord and Master, then I trust you to help me do what I can't do on my own; walk through this storm to you.' Which? Is Peter testing Jesus or trusting him?

This is an important insight into the nature of our relationship with Jesus, for how often in moments of crisis do we call upon Jesus to come to our help: but do we do so to test him or because we trust him?

Jesus shouts back, one word: 'Come!' Why would Jesus invite Peter to do something that Peter, like you and I, simply can't do - walk on water? Is it because as we see elsewhere in the gospels Jesus never rejects anyone who appeals to him, however impossible (humanly speaking) their situation is? Or is it a word of assurance because to people of faith Jesus is never out of reach however difficult our human circumstances may be?

In answer to 'Come,' we have the almost comical scene of Peter climbing out of the pitching boat and start walking on the turbulent water. Test or trust, he doesn't get very far. He falls into the stormy sea. But Jesus saves his life and together they are helped into the boat.

As the disciples and Jesus are reunited the storm subsides. The story ends in thankful worship.

A happy ending? Well not quite. For we are left with Jesus' chiding remark to Peter: 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

This story is about faith in Jesus in a world, where floods, famine, bushfires (remember them?) and viruses rage and threaten our security which encompasses the myth about the certainty of the pattern of our lives. It's about faith and doubt in the context of unwanted change - even chaos for the stormy sea is, in the Bible, a metaphor for the chaos which threatens our so-called ordered world. (Think of the tale of Jonah).

Matthew affirms in story form a truth about Jesus being with us, and our faith in Him to be alongside us through crises which threaten to overwhelm us. It's a story born of faith to grow our faith.

We know how chaotic and stormy life can be. This year has found many of us in small boats isolated and alone on rough seas. We can feel that we are out in the vast deep blue, miles from land, that we've lost our bearings and are uncertain what the future holds and facing the reality that life is beyond our control. Where and how do we find the hope and courage to continue in a world where even after the worst of the pandemic is over life will not be the same?

At one level while we may desire a return to the familiar and find the uncertainty the pandemic has brought unwelcome, we're actually quite good at living with uncertainty. We can never know all there is to know; there will always be too many unknown, unknowns. As Voltaire put it "doubt is uncomfortable, but certainty is absurd." Uncertainty isn't a bad thing, it's a natural thing.

I believe that the pandemic with all the pain and dislocation and the uncertainty that it has brought is providing the church with the opportunity to worship and minister in new ways the like of which has not been seen in our lifetimes.

Matthew encourages us to take the leap of faith that will enable us to make the most of these opportunities. For Jesus, God incarnate, is not above it all. In his humanity he comes to us in the storm, is with us in the storm. Maybe he's not instantly recognisable; but he's there. We don't have to summon him. He calls us to do what to us, overwhelmed by wind and waves, seems impossible. Walk on water? Our faith isn't up to it. But if we can summon up enough faith in him to get out of the boat (and some of us may find that the boat is about to capsize and leaves us little choice) and take the first step or two, he will stretch out his hand and hold us. And that is what matters – not what caused the storm, not even whether we'll survive it, not when and how it will end. None of that. What really matters is the truth born of faith that at He is with us in the storm and with him all things are possible.

Amen