

# Trust Even in the Storm

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**Kathleen Rushton** describes how the story of the Calming of the Storm in Mark 4:35-41 highlights the qualities of discipleship for today.

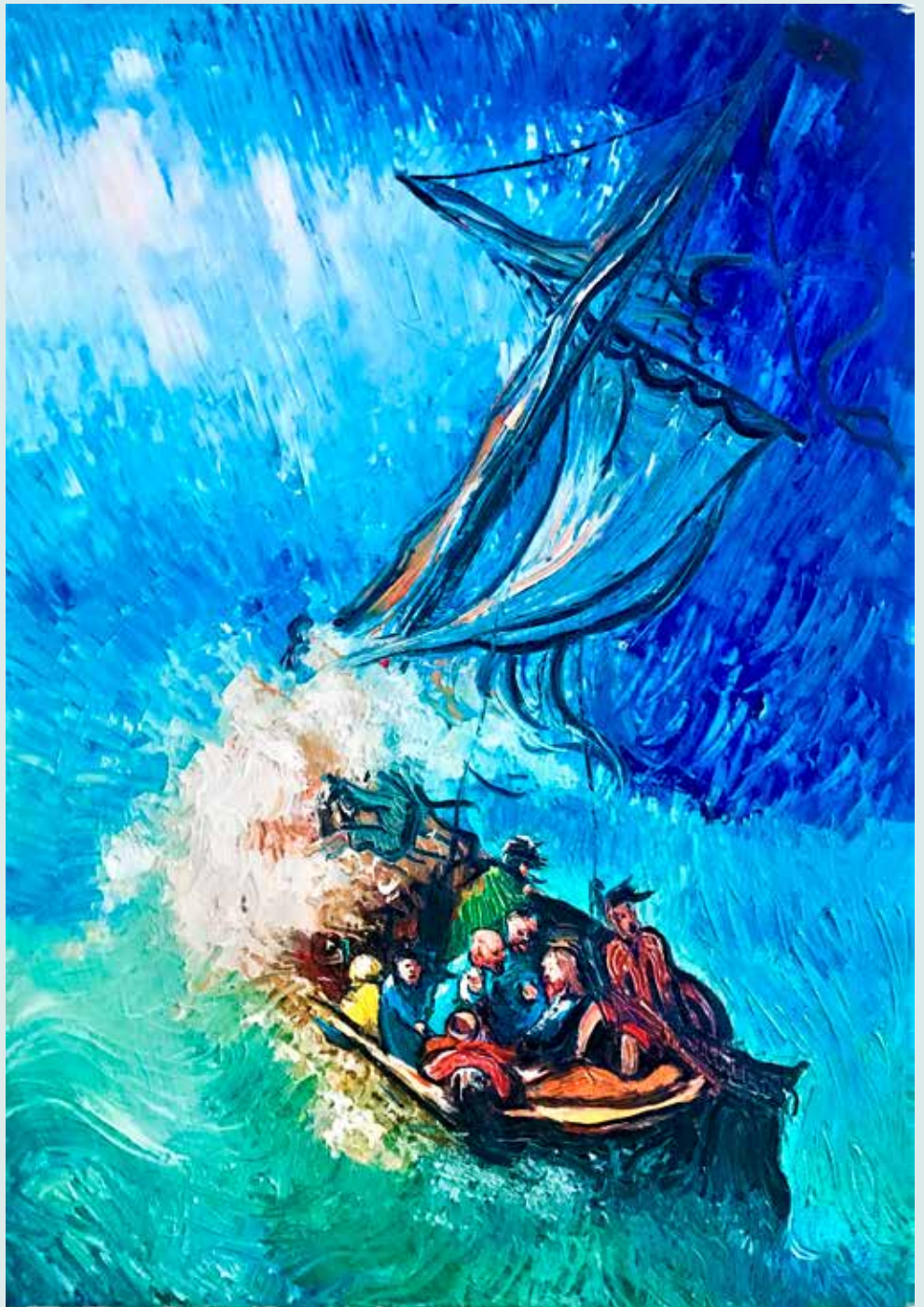
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JESUS WAS TEACHING beside the sea. Such a large crowd had “gathered around him that he got into the boat on sea” and sat there teaching them in parables (Mark 4:2-34). Then, “when evening approached,” Jesus initiates the call to “go across to the other side.”

## “Go across to the other side”

This invitation is a call to participate in extending God’s mission. The “other side” is unfamiliar Gentile territory. Mark’s community, who are experiencing persecution, are being challenged to grow in new ways. This is the first of several times Jesus and his disciples cross the lake “to the other side” (Mk 5:1, 21; 6:45; 7:31; 8:13, 22). The Evangelist uses the geology of the travels of Jesus to emphasise theological points about him.

The sea is a barrier that needs crossing. It separates East from West and is symbolic of the divide between Jews and Gentiles. The eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, across from Capernaum, was Gentile territory.



As Jesus journeys there and back again, Mark portrays him as bringing people from different cultural backgrounds to unity. He overcomes barriers of separation by reinterpreting the Torah to highlight its original liberating potential.

Mark is encouraging not only his Greco-Roman readers who lived in Rome, but also we today, to live the inclusive household of Jesus in our own household and community.

## “Other boats were with him”

The story tells us that “other boats

were with him [Jesus].” The phrase “to be with him” is a term for discipleship in Mark’s Gospel (cf. 3:14; 5:18).

The “other boats” represent other faithful communities of disciples and indicate that others, including today’s readers, can enter the story by placing themselves in those “other boats.”

## Sea of Galilee

The Sea of Galilee is known for having violent storms which are caused by strong winds funnelling through the steep valleys in the surrounding hills. In the story a “great storm of wind”

disturbs the progress of the boat. Waves come crashing and swamping it with water. The threat of sinking is very real. In the midst of all this turmoil, Jesus is in the stern asleep.

In biblical literature, out of control water is an image of chaos as in Psalm 42:7: "All your waves and your billows have gone over me." In the creation story, God gathers the watery chaos together and lets dry land appear (Genesis 1:6-9). God "appointed for" the waters "a boundary they may not pass so that they might not again cover the earth" (Ps 104:5-9).

### Trust in God

The setting of the story is evening: diminishing light and growing darkness, aloneness and isolation. In the fierce storm, Jesus "was in the stern, asleep on a cushion." He represents perfect trust in God.

In Scripture lying down in a peaceful and untroubled sleep is presented as an act of trust in God. The Book of Job says: "you will be protected and take your rest in safety" (11:18). The Psalmist declares: "I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety" (Ps 4:8; cf. Ps 3:5; Proverbs 3:24).

The disciples do not share the serenity of Jesus who is neither threatened nor overwhelmed. They wake him with the reproach: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

This is the first time in this Gospel that Jesus has been called "Teacher." He had had a whole day teaching. Now, the reader can be prepared to receive a significant teaching.

### The Experience of the Church

Mark is not only telling a remarkable story about the storm but also about the experience of the early Christians. The tiny boat setting out on a journey is the symbol of the small, struggling early church storm-tossed on the sea of the extensive Roman Empire which

was hostile to the church and sought to destroy it. The disciples receive an immediate response from Jesus who awakes and "rebukes" the wind. Mark uses "rebuke" elsewhere when Jesus confronts evil.

Australian biblical writer Michael Trainor points out that Mark's constant concern is the absence of faith in the disciples. The questions that Jesus directs to the disciples in the boat: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mk 4:40) are intended for all those in Mark's community who gathered at that time in households, as well as to all disciples throughout the ages to our time, who may experience feeling "swamped" or overwhelmed by our situations.

### Jesus a Living Likeness of God

Before the storm on the sea incident, Jesus had taught all day and had linked three parables that address the question of what the reign of God is like. The three parables, which are connected by the image of seeds (Mk 4:2-34), echo the Scriptures in which God the Creator is imaged as a Sower.

But the last episode in the chapter where Jesus stills the sea Mark is presenting a different answer. Jesus is acting the way God does in the Psalms: "Who is as mighty as you, O Lord? ... You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them." (Ps 89:9).

God "stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations (Ps 65:7) and "made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed" (Ps 107:29). Jesus is a kind of parable, a living likeness of God. Jesus is teaching by his actions.

### "Christ Asleep in You"

St Augustine preached on the calming of the sea story: "When you are insulted, that is the wind. When you are angry, that is the waves. So when the winds blow and the waves surge,

the boat is in danger, your heart is in jeopardy, your heart is tossed to and fro. On being insulted, you long to retaliate. But revenge brings another kind of misfortune – shipwreck ... Why? Because Christ is asleep in you. What do I mean? I mean that you have forgotten Christ. Rouse him, then; remember Christ, let Christ awake within you, give heed to him."

When we need "to go across to the other side" and when we are with "those in other boats," we are called "to be with him" as faithful disciples. The calming of the sea story invites us to rely on Christ in our own storms – to "let Christ awake within you." ✦

23 June: Mark 4:35-41 – 12th Sunday of Ordinary Time; 5th Sunday after Pentecost.

#### *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*

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