Sermon – 31st January, 2021 – BBC Radio 4 – Ps 107:23-32 / Jonah 1:3-13 / Mark 4:35-41

**On this day, 68 years ago, the Shipping Forecast issued at 0655 hours for Saturday 31st January, 1953 was: “Sea areas Malin, Faroes, Hebrides. Severe North to North West Gales becoming generally northerly later. Showers with sleet or snow”.**

**By the end of that day, and the Great Storm of 1953, over 300 people had lost their lives across the United Kingdom. 21,000 people had been made homeless, and over 200,000 acres of land in the East of England had been inundated by the North Sea. And among the losses, on that day, was the Stranraer to Larne ferry, the Princess Victoria. As the ferry left the shelter of Loch Ryan in South West Scotland, mountainous seas breached the stern doors of the exposed car deck. Unable to steer the ship back to Stranraer, the captain ran ahead of the storm for the shelter of Belfast Lough. But the ship foundered near the mouth of the lough. Of 179 passengers and crew who had boarded the Princess Victoria that morning, 135 were lost, including 33 residents of this city.**

**For a “city shaped by the sea” and the seafarers of her port, the power of nature and the force of the sea is never to be underestimated. It’s why we frequently use storm words to describe our greatest challenges. In communities struggling most with Covid, people will speak of a Tsunami of infections. In relation to the multiple challenges of Brexit in the midst of a pandemic others will talk about a “perfect storm”.**

**This morning, what can we learn from the scriptures we have heard? Let me offer you three words, three ideas, which lie at the heart of today’s readings, because each reading demonstrates an intimate knowledge of the power of a storm.**

**The first word is “Respect”. In each passage we encounter a respect for power of the sea, and the forces of nature. Psalm 107 declares “Those who go down to the sea in ships, they have seen the works of the Lord, his wonders in the deep”.**

**Jonah thought he could hide from God and God’s call for him to rescue the people of the city of Ninevah. He thought if he ran away to sea, God would not be there to catch up with him. Only when trapped by the force of the storm did Jonah admit “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who created the sea and the dry land”**

**And the disciples of Jesus, although each was an experienced sailor, even these men feared for their lives. How could Jesus be asleep on a cushion, when they were in danger of drowning as the waves crashed over the sides of their boat?**

**In face of the power of nature, whether that is climate change, a world pandemic or setting sail in the teeth of a storm, we are called to a place of respect, of awe. We are to know that God is not absent from the storm, but present at the very heart of it, not absent but present in Intensive Care Units, and vaccination centres across this country and across the world.**

**The second word we are given in the face of these storms is “Co-operation”. In the Psalm, the crew cry out together to God for their rescue. In the story of Jonah, the other sailors are appalled that Jonah is asleep. The very least he could do is call on his god for rescue, as they are calling on theirs. And the most he can do is to return to the God he has been avoiding, and seek God’s partnership to overcome the peril.**

**And for Jesus, standing in the stern and commanding the storm to be silenced, Jesus wants to know why his disciples did not believe that because they were together they would survive?**

**Faced with whatever storm in life we confront, we are called to co-operation and shared responsibility. Whether that is wearing face coverings for the sake of all, or ensuring a fair distribution of precious vaccines, to the poorest countries as much as to those which can pay most. The writer John Donne famously reminds us that “no man is an island” unconnected to others. Whether our storm is personal, racial or national, God calls us to know the importance of co-operation, of fellowship, because our rescue is always a shared rescue.**

**And finally, “Trust”, faith. The Psalmist declares “He brought them to the haven they desired”. When Jonah finally placed his utter trust in God and God’s purposes, Jonah allowed the other crew members to throw him overboard, not to drown but to be rescued by the God he worshipped.**

**And Jesus’ challenge to his closest disciples was this: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith in me?”**

**Throughout the current pandemic, many people have said “Our faith is in science and in the miracle of the vaccine” And of course it is. But behind the science, which unlocks our knowledge of truth which already exists, and behind the miracle of a vaccine, developed out of unprecedented co-operation, there stands a greater faith and a greater hope. God’s love and care and belief in our humanity.**

**We strive because in the storm God is more present than anywhere else. We hope because we are made to co-operate, because in fellowship we are always more. And we believe, because God believes in us, because in every storm Jesus does not sleep, he is in command. And in every storm he calls us to greater trust and greater faith in him.**