

**Trinity 12, Year A, Proper 14**  
**10 August 2008**

1 Kings 19: 9-18  
Psalm 85: 8-13  
Romans 10: 5-15  
Matthew 14:22-33

Today's gospel follows on from last week's: having fed the five thousand, Jesus goes off alone (again), and sends the disciples across the lake in a boat to face storms and their own inadequacy.

First, a word about *sea* in Hebrew Scripture. If you remember the creation stories, you'll recall that very early in the process, earth is separated from the waters. The earth where we plant our feet, the sea where we flail about and sink. The sea is an image of chaos – unpredictability, the opposite of wisdom in a sense. The sea is inhabited by leviathans and these are not just whales and all that move in the waters, but symbols for the troubles of life that rise up like waves and engulf us. When you look at today's Gospel in this light, it becomes more than just a miracle story.

And there is no shortage of storms that threaten to engulf us.

- Global: the filthy rich getting filthier and the poor getting poorer.
- National: dishonesty, spin peddled as truth even when the evidence of our eyes contradicts it; a me-too culture; the failure to acknowledge that rights bring responsibilities. And so on.
- Church: Both in today's gospel, and bang up to date today, the Church is likened to a boat in a storm with no competent captain to steer the ship. Sound familiar? The Church is in danger of being swamped or smashed on rocks. Women bishops, women priests, homosexuality, the nature of leadership, the authority of Scripture. And not just the Anglican church either.
- And local, the storms of church life, forging new relationships, devising ways of working to suit changing circumstances.

It's a hard fact that the sea is indeed a suitable model for life. Life is unpredictable. It will never be comfortable – and if it is, we can be sure that our comfort is at the expense of someone else's distress. It's a real challenge for us to accept that we are not in control: we can't control the storms of life, and we can't control each other.

And neither, I put it to you, should we want to. If we look at particle physics, where chaos theory seems to rule, things of great beauty result from unpredictability – or what seems to us poor blinkered humans to be unpredictability. We need to learn to accept what comes – this is a lesson that I need to take to heart. Sure, we might make loose plans for the future, but let them be just that: loose, plastic, flexible. I know from 30 years of pastoral work that most of people's distress arises when reality does not match up to expectation, when expectations are too firm. So rather than trying to control each other, surely the thing is to appreciate each other's gifts, and do all we can to allow those gifts to be fruitful. That will take us into a future that we can't predict. It means taking risks, but then Jesus was for ever encouraging people to take risks rather than vegetate in cosy comfort. If Our Lord's teaching is to be relied upon, the result will be delightful, unexpected. It will lead us into new experiences rather than stagnation. We will be challenged, we will be uncomfortable, but then is not that what Jesus Christ did throughout his ministry: disturbing the comfortable and comforting the disturbed? The image of God the disturber that Abraham knew, that Elijah knew, that Job knew, that Jesus himself knew, that we know.

Comforting the disturbed is what we see Jesus doing in today's Gospel. It's almost as if he sets them off on a course that he knows will disturb them, and then he's there to comfort them. He brings peace—but beware! peace is not what folk often think it is. To the Jews, then and now—and remember that Jesus was a Jew—peace (*shalom*, *salaam*, *salvation*) is something that you have to be prepared to fight for. Peace implies defended boundaries. Peace means wholeness—that is, what is stolen from you must be restored to you before you can say you are at peace. It is not flabby, spineless niceness. It is robust, something that has been arrived at by argument, by negotiation and by acknowledgement of errors and regret for mistakes. *Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins ....* The passage to peace is stormy. Friendship requires honesty and straightforwardness, and better harsh honesty than dissembling diplomacy.

I say to you that we need these stormy winds to freshen us up and help us to sort out what's important. We need to step out into them, as Peter did, and not lose heart at the occasional squall – and there are plenty squalls in life as we deal with bureaucracy, with commercial concerns, and with each other. We need critical friends, not yes-men, to keep us in touch with reality. We must go into the unknown together, trusting each other, with faith that a hand greater than ours will shape our plans and actions.

The ride is unlikely to be predictable, but its fruits will be delightful.