

Holy Places

Barrowden Patronal Festival 24 June 2018.

Stilling of the Storm (Mk. 4.35 – 41)

Masses of beautiful flowers; the church cleaned and polished; a wonderful peal of bells and rushes on the floor to celebrate the Patronal Festival of St. Peter's. Thank you and congratulations!

Why are churches such as this so passionately loved and cared for? They are old, but so is the AI – in fact much older! They are beautiful architecturally but so is the Shard! They have ecclesiastical names – but so does St. Pancras Station!

Why are our churches so venerated? Surprisingly, the story of The Stilling of the Storm might give us some idea:

Mark records this miracle to illustrate *Jesus' clash with demons*. Churches are not immune to rows and scandal but the presence of Jesus with the disciples helped them to retain some peace of mind through the rage. So Jesus was present and the disciples were only too aware that his company was crucial.

Secondly, *a great calm* followed the storm. Some places accumulate an atmosphere of peace and churches are high up among them. We go there to seek peace, not to escape but to renew ourselves for daily life where peace is so often very scarce. T.S.Eliot in his poem, 'Little Gidding' makes the point about the purpose of a church:

*"You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid."*

Thirdly, Jesus scolds the disciples for *their lack of faith*. This suggests that the miracle is not wish-fulfilment on the part of the disciples but a power beyond them that works to guide them through the storm. We too come to church, often doubting our faith. The storm reminds us that faith is a gift of God to perfect our humanity and is unlikely to be withdrawn for bad behaviour.

Finally, the disciples were *filled with awe* as a result of this experience. They were astonished, surprised, filled with respect and admiration for what had happened. Churches such as this do have that atmosphere of wonder about them. Even the agnostic poet Philip Larkin, stumbling on a ruined church in Humberside, writes,

"a serious house on serious earth it is." (Church Going)

No doubt the boat which is at the centre of this miracle didn't last very long at all. It was not a 2 star heritage site but those 4 elements of encounter, calm, faith and awe can all be applied to this church to help us understand how it attains its reputation – a reputation which we might translate as holiness.

Holiness.

We can understand holiness as something set apart for or by God – even the quality of God himself. In the Old Testament holiness was a moveable item. It was located in the ark which was carried on a cart before the people of God; then in the Land of Israel which God gave to his chosen people or in The Temple in Jerusalem where God dwells. But after the Resurrection and the teaching of Jesus, holiness was located everywhere for He made holy the common things of life: bread, wine, human beings: all acquired a new and infinite value.

But if holiness is everywhere then – in order to identify it – God needs to guarantee its presence somewhere: in Christ, in his apostles, in his church. The medieval world yearned to visit the holy sites of Israel but finance or war would prohibit it so alternative centres of pilgrimage grew up in Europe: Rome, Santiago, Walsingham, Canterbury. These holy sites became famous because of those 4 categories which we identified in the miracle of the stilling of the storm: Christ's activity, a sense of calm, a measure of faith and a feeling of awe.

The Fascination of Holiness.

We can locate these 4 pointers towards holiness in our own churches too.

Christ's battle with the demons continues today. It is here that Christ lays down his life for us and shares it in the mystery of Holy Communion. This Eucharist slays the demons of social division, of grasping rather than sharing, of taking rather than giving.

Secondly, it is here that we can find calm through the re-assurance of forgiveness from our own mistakes. We are accepted through our baptism, whoever we are. We treat each other with the respect which Christ himself deserves. Here, at our best, we find cooperation rather than competition.

Thirdly, we bring the embers of our faith to be refreshed. We bear our injuries, loss and disappointments to this church where they are set within an eternal context which re-calibrates all our desires.

Finally, the atmosphere of awe, respect, wonder finds its response in the way we care for this building. Here we meet to search the scriptures and to gather at the table of the Lord, our Host. This is holy ground. Silence is the only response to the godly generosity of which we are aware as through a glass darkly.

But we feel we should do more than that. The flower rota, brass cleaners holy dusters and those who come in to pray, to plead or to adore in silence all augment this respect for the holy in our midst – and on a Patronal Festival we can thank God for the example of St. Peter whose impatience, short temper and vision gives us all a reassurance that the church is a bunch of forgiven sinners who only did their duty. Amen.