

JUNE 21 2015

*Fierce was the wild billow, dark was the night;  
oars laboured heavily, foam glimmered white;  
trembled the mariners, peril was nigh:  
then said the God of God, "Peace! it is I."*

*Ridge of the mountain-wave, lower thy crest!  
wail of Euroclydon, be thou at rest!  
Sorrow can never be, darkness must fly,  
where saith the Light of Light, "Peace! it is I."*

*Jesus, Deliverer, come thou to me;  
soothe thou my voyaging over life's sea:  
thou, when the storm of death roars, sweeping by,  
whisper, O Truth of Truth, "Peace! it is I."*

That hymn is probably seldom sung these days.

It was written by Anatolius of Constantinople in the fifth century and translated by the prolific J M Neale in the nineteenth.

At first I was puzzled by Euroclydon, and then discovered it was a cyclonic tempestuous northeast wind which blows in the Mediterranean, mostly in autumn and winter.

Hardly likely on the Sea of Galilee.

Of course there are other hymns that pick up the theme of the storm – *Eternal Father, strong to save*, and hit on a very potent fear for the inhabitants of the ancient world.

The sea for them was a force they could not fight against.

It was immense and apparently without limits, infested with strange and dangerous creatures, its depths unplumbed.

Any journey by sea was only taken by necessity and had to be as short as possible.

Disaster always lurked.

Only God, who created it, could possibly control the sea, calm its storms.

So when Jesus, who had been sleeping on a cushion in the stern of the boat, was woken by his followers, his rebuke to the storm affirmed that here was God himself, in this man.

That is the first and fundamental message of the Gospel reading today and it is summed up in the Anatolius hymn.

It was a stunning revelation to the disciples and it should come home afresh to us too, because it is so easy for us to put to one side the belief we shall re-iterate in a few minutes, as we acknowledge the mystery of the Word made flesh in the Nicene Creed.

This is God, here among us.

The second message is an extension of this.

Those who first heard Mark's Gospel lived under the threat and even the reality of persecution.

It was a storm that threatened to destroy them.

For us, though we may not face persecution in the way that the Roman Christians did in the first century, there is always the threat of the personal storms of illness, loss, betrayal, bereavement or breakdown.

These things can destroy us and in a sense we are helpless.

As Christians we are assailed by scepticism, longing for certainty where there can only be faith, unnerved by the apparent success of other churches, wondering where we have gone wrong, seeing change and decay all around us.

Fear and panic lurk.

Has God lost control of the boat?

It is so easy to believe that we are alone, tossed about in a hostile sea.

For us, as for the first believers, there is a still centre for us – Christ himself, the Word made flesh.

For them, though the saving events were chronologically close, there was the same existential doubt.

Had there been a point to all of this?

Had they wasted their time?

Had they needlessly put their lives in danger?

The disciples cited by Luke on the road to Emmaus, confided to the stranger who joined them: *our hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free. And this is not all: two whole days have gone by since it all happened.*

*Our hope had been...*

Later, in the context of a meal the veil was lifted and they recognised Jesus in the breaking of bread.

Their hearts had burned within them and they were convinced of the abiding presence of the Christ, the conqueror of death.

Doubt will never vanish from the Christian tradition because it is closely related to faith: there is always a chance that all of this is not true, that we really are alone, abandoned, adrift with no hope of a future.

By living with doubt we are in touch with the tradition of the apostles and all our predecessors in the faith.

To build this church was an act of faith – faith rewarded by the fact that the Eucharist is still offered here eight hundred years later and in a form that would be recognised by those who first worshipped here.

To be certain is to have abandoned faith, to refuse to live dangerously and travel light.

Christ is in this with us, and we can believe that because by his incarnation he took on human flesh and shared this life with us – true God and true Man.

At the hands of sinners, at our hands if you like, he joined us in death, so that no aspect of the human predicament was outside his experience.

And now that he has conquered death and lives for ever he has taken us into eternal life, so that nothing can ever separate us from him.

As the living Christ assured our predecessors of his presence in the blessed sacrament, so too, today in this Eucharistic celebration he is our food and drink too.

We can often feel abandoned, alone, but only need to consider that in food and drink – bread and wine – the same Christ comes to us unfailingly, to sustain, encourage and feed us.

Traditionally, the last act of Holy Communion before a person dies is called *viaticum* – food for the journey.

In a wider sense this sacrament is always food for our journey through life – a lifeline.

So the heart of our tradition rests on the conviction that God is with us, in this world in a unique, specific and reliable way.

Because of that we can embrace the words of Anatolius and applaud the linguistic skill of J M Neale:

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