

HYMNS: **364** “O for a thousand tongues to sing”
 449 “Lord of creation”
 82 “How great thou art”

READINGS: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Mark 4:35-41

“Still stilling storms?”

Firstly can I thank you for the invitation to share in worship with you today; and to bring the greetings of the London District of which we are all part. Also very poignant for me personally as I bid farewell to my District role this weekend – and indeed to active ministry at the Conference beginning later this week – to be preaching here, in Wesley’s pulpit.

As many will know, our District centre is based at Westminster Central Hall, so it is that I frequently make the journey there from home by tube.

It’s a journey of 2 halves; firstly travelling down northern line, then changing onto the Victoria line. So it was that one morning I began the journey in relative comfort with a seat and began to do a crossword in a paper that had been left behind. When I changed tube in the rush hour I found myself standing next to someone who had mastered the art of strap-hanging and writing at the same time.

I saw he was doing the same crossword that I had begun and, with a natural height advantage, it was impossible not to peer over his shoulder to check his answers to the clues I had not yet managed. At first it was disconcerting to see that none of his answers were the same as mine, until I realised that this crossword, like others, had two sets of clues: general knowledge clues & cryptic (or hidden) clues - and he was attempting one set while I had been attempting the other.

Choosing which clues to work with and live by is a constant, though often unconscious, process

All of us revert at times, no doubt, to the general knowledge, common sense clues generated and shaped by background & culture, family & peers, personal instincts or public media. They become the rules of thumb by which we operate and try to make sense

Alongside, those, not least for people of faith, run the alternative sources, other stories and traditions: cryptic clues that offer different ways of seeing the world, both enriching & challenging who we are...sometimes going against our general knowledge and frequently going beyond it.

That process is constantly at work in the gospel story: wherever you stop action & zoom in... you see Jesus’ encounter with a range of ordinary people in which boundaries and world views are stretched; assumptions & traditions are reversed;

individuals are led to edge of their own experience and then beyond to discern 'Kingdom' values at work; opportunities are offered for seeing with fresh eyes, redefining what matters, walking in new ways.

His is a life in which solidarity with others (incarnation), self-denial and self-sacrifice (crucifixion) and the transforming power of love (resurrection) are cryptic clues that unlock our understanding of how God's world is meant to be – and in Jesus already is.

So it is that we read in today's gospel in Mk 4 of incident well-known as the Stilling of storm...

For many I imagine the passage raises a general knowledge question: could this have happened? But let's not get too distracted by that concern, since contemporary science-based questions posed to the pre-scientific age of the New Testament are rarely very productive.

The real focus of the passage is found elsewhere: in the question 'Who can this be, that even the wind and sea obey him?'

At that point the solver of cryptic clues will come into their own: Perhaps noting the striking similarities between this passage and an early story by the Greek classical writer Homer who at one point tells of Odysseus sleeping on rug in stern of boat during a storm that is calmed by Aeolus master of the wind. But those Greek names may have too many letters to be the right answer.

So let's look again and closer to the Christian tradition where we find within the Hebrew Bible that reference in Genesis to God as creator who sets boundaries to the waters of chaos; and who in Psalms 107 stills the waves and the storm. Here surely is an answer that fits: as Mark (here as elsewhere) presents Jesus as the one who has unique authority to act on behalf of God.

Mark's original readers may or may not have been well-versed in Greek or Hebrew backgrounds, but they were well-versed in reality. They were probably part of a Christian community in Rome, at the heart of alien empire, persecuted for their faith and quite likely to have called out of their suffering and confusion: we are sinking, are you asleep, do you not care?

And their challenge to faith – as ours – was not whether or not this traditional story happened, but whether the cryptic clues to which it points are true.

Is this one who appears to act with divine authority to be trusted? Does the One he represents care about what happens to us and our turbulent world?

Do we have to live cautiously, fearfully, as if the life is ultimately threatening and chaotic, or at best morally neutral – or can we trust the claim that creation has been pronounced good, trustworthy because at heart it is underwritten by a source of love and creativity we call God, and whose human face we see in this man Jesus?

If so then his words and actions, his stories and riddles, his self-offering, death and resurrection become an endless source of cryptic clues for us, challenging our general knowledge and addressing some of our frequently asked questions with a resounding Yes!

Yes, there is a promise of mercy so wide that we might all know forgiveness and grace whoever we are and whatever we've done, and be free to let go & move on.

Yes, there is a well of compassion so deep so that no act of compassion is ever lost, no act of goodness is wasted: so we can attempt to resist apathy or compliance & live more generously.

Yes, there is the possibility of love and goodness at the heart of universe so powerful that we might dare to pray and work for the ultimate triumph of justice.

And these convictions matter, these cryptic clues are not just for entertainment to while away a tube journey; they can profoundly affect how people behave and how our world is continually shaped.

When earlier this week Pope Francis published his Encyclical Laudato Si - Praise to you my Lord (a title drawn from a canticle of St Francis) – about issues of environmental deterioration his appeal is designed literally to still the storms, along with floods and other phenomena that threaten the lives of some of the poorest.

He is asking in effect: we are sinking, do you not care?

He recognises that success of technological solutions will require a new universal solidarity, in which consumption is replaced by sacrifice and greed by generosity. He does not under-estimate the scale of the challenge but insists that creation has been pronounced good, the Creator who is 'goodness without measure' does not abandon us – so that 'humanity still has the ability to work together in building a common home'

When in recent days the relatives of the tragic gun attack in the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston speak of the forgiveness they offer to a frighteningly young perpetrator, they draw on their faith in the possibility of hope and transformation to still both the personal and political storms that would be understandable at such a time.

They are in effect asking: we are sinking, do you not care?

And they answer by challenging cycles of fear and the forces of racism that can capsize whole communities as they insist: 'we will not let hate win'.

When a young rapper and poet Andre Anderson determined to change the image and 'transform the energies' of the London estate on which he grew up he gathered together 5 other young writers and published a volume 'Authors of the Estate' to put through every door in that community to encourage participation and renewal.

He is asking in effect: we are sinking, do you not care?

Asked himself in a radio interview what inspired and sustained him he replied I've always been to church and learned that you don't have to be like other people (not conformed, but transformed in the renewal of your minds is how Romans 12 might have put it); and that conviction may well contribute to stilling the storms of despair, resisting waves of apathy that threaten to undermine and erode human confidence and dignity in the place where he lives.

Whenever – in words of the epistle – despite suffering and tribulation 'we recommend ourselves by steadfast endurance or by innocent behaviour, by grasp of truth, by patience and kindness and the gifts of the Spirit and unaffected love...then, says Paul, we are in touch with a source of strength that empowers us to overcome:

Not just to hang on in, but to discover as we plumb the depths of experience the things that ultimately matter: 'For though we may seem to some as imposters we speak truth; though poor in many ways we may bring wealth to many; though penniless we own the world'

Or, as we might more naturally say today, whenever any of us individuals or communities draw courage and strength to resist the forces that can so easily overwhelm us: the hurtful acts and untrue words, the betrayals of love and trust, the temptations to retaliate and hit back – and still find capacity to go on loving, caring, forgiving, then the faith in the goodness of creation is affirmed, the canticle Laudato Si – Praise to you O lord – rings out loud.

Such canticles, such convictions are not always easy to sustain. It is often easier to live by the general knowledge of self-interest and the ways of least resistance than by the cryptic clues of Kingdom values and gospel possibilities. Hence the significance of who we are and what we are doing together here this morning.

Together as a Methodist District we number 244 churches. Until quite recently it was 247 and then even easier to remind ourselves that Methodism exists 24/7 across the city: communities of worship and service seeking to be acted parables of diversity and inclusion, centres of hospitality and hope for others.

It has been a privilege to work in this context for many years and to be able to affirm so many creative and powerful expressions of faith and faithfulness; to pay tribute to so many individual congregations for their faithful and extraordinary ministry and mission – as I most certainly want to do here today here at Wesley's Chapel.

All of them place where God's people gather week by week to reclaim the stories that shape us and the vision that sustains us; to learn the grammar of grace and practise the language of respect; to interpret the cryptic clues of hope and possibility in which the gospels abound.

And so by our life together and our encouragement of one another, to offer testimony to the One of whom, thru faith and experience of many storms, we have learned that even the winds and seas obey him!

Amen