

Sunday 20 February 2022 – 2nd before Lent

(Genesis 2. 4b-9, 15-end); Revelation 4; Luke 8. 22-25

“Where is your faith ?” we hear Jesus ask the terrified disciples, after he has calmed the storm on Lake Galilee. This at least is Luke’s rendering of what he said. The other synoptic gospels, Matthew and Mark, have it as “You of little faith, why did you doubt ?” or “Have you still no faith ?”. Quite a rough rebuke, we might think, particularly when we consider that for the people of that time the sea was the symbol of chaos and the forces alien to God; we can follow this in Genesis, in Psalm 89 and in Isaiah. Hence the amazement of the disciples at what Jesus has done.

All of Luke 8 up to this point has been devoted to various accounts of proclaiming the Good News, firstly in highlighting the role of women who accompany Jesus and provide for him on his journeys, notably Mary Magdalene, the parable of the sower, the lamp under a jar, and the explanation of who is his extended family. This is followed by the incident we have just heard read, as well as various healings.

The question “where is your faith” or “you of little faith” also presents a challenge for us. We use it, in its old-fashioned form of “O ye of little faith”, quite regularly today. It is intended as a humorous rebuke to someone who has doubted whether something is possible or can be achieved, and as such has retained its original intended meaning. If said to a Christian, it could well lead to being taken seriously or regarded as offensive, as a suggestion that their Christian commitment is less than complete. Perhaps, like me, you have experienced being accosted by a very enthusiastic Evangelical (not here in Woodbridge, I hasten to add) who has left you with the impression that your faith is simply not up to scratch.

Which brings us to the challenge: what is this Christian faith of which we are being accused of being lukewarm followers ? Are we familiar with the

basics ? After all, compared to the disciples of Jesus, we have the benefit of hindsight and knowledge of what followed the ministry of Jesus on earth, without the period the original disciples went through, having to learn the hard way the truth of who Jesus really was. For us, if we are serious about it, there can be no excuses.

Needless to say, 2000 years have elapsed between then and now. We have inherited the Christian church, which has undergone many forms and both internal and external changes. But we have the extraordinary gift of the four Gospels, as well as the Letter to the Hebrews, and the letters from Paul and other apostles. We also have the example of all the saints down the ages, who have shown how powerful the Christian message is, for example most recently Desmond Tutu, and we have the example of those who have taught us what it means to be a Christian, whether in words or deeds or both.

In Hebrews 11 we have the famous phrase: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible”.

Above all we have a responsibility to God and Jesus Christ to make him known wherever and whenever possible, to be prepared for enquiries and questions, and because we are all made in his image, to see that image in everyone we meet, and to reflect that image in our own lives. To help us in this Jesus bequeathed his disciples the Holy Spirit just after his resurrection, and this bequest, this wonderful gift, is with us and within us today to enable us to see the signs of his kingdom in the world and in our daily lives. The former Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, used to use the phrase “expect the unexpected”, which for me is a warning and an indication that I must be alert to everyone and everything going on around me.

Around me means not just what is happening in my street, but all over the world. This has become of vital importance down the centuries and most recently in events in the Middle East, and now Ukraine, but also in another man-made situation: climate change, causing us to look again at how we treat God's earth. Technology ensures that nothing now escapes our attention, nor should it, so there are no excuses for ignorance. As God's agents in the world, we are responsible for our actions or inaction.

This gift, the gift of seeing the connections between what we do and the consequences of it, is a gift the disciples did not yet have, but we do and we have a duty to use it carefully and wisely. It cannot always be seen physically, but its effects are everlasting. We can thank the apostles, disciples and saints for grasping the gift and making it known down the ages. Little or no faith ? Give them a break !