Lent -2 sermon

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

[Open our ears, O Lord,
to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always. Amen]

How do we learn? How much of what we learn stays in our heads**? What cements leaning in our memory?**

**I’m an engineer by training**. I studied electrical and electronic engineering at university just as the microprocessor burst onto the world. It was a superb time to be in the industry, with technology evolving rapidly and so many new applications for this new technology. Not least on my model railway aspirations. That is probably this part of the course stuck in my head.

**Not everything I was taught sank in or was useful**. I remember about a year into my first job going back to my university notes to look something up. I had organised my final year folders so that each contained two separate subjects. I found the folder, opened it, looked at the page and panicked. I didn’t understand a word of what I was reading. Then I relaxed: I had opened the wrong half of the folder and I realised that I would never have to worry about the subject in front of me ever again.

But it must say something about the way I was taught that in so short a space of time I had so completely forgotten everything about Control Theory.

**My son Tom’s going through the process of learning how to teach**. It’s quite interesting for me since I get to comment on his essays. The last one was about how we learn and therefore how teachers should teach scientific subjects like physics. Very simplistically (without allowing for factors such as different levels of student motivation or prior knowledge) it summarises as

* **Give your students a problem**
* **talk them through how you would solve the problem,**
* **get them to walk you through the problem,**
* **then get them do it themselves.**

And I wonder if that is what Jesus may be up to in today’s gospel: teaching his disciples by showing them how to solve a problem.

To come to that conclusion, we need to zoom out from those few verses and take a wider look a Jesus’s ministry as portrayed by Luke. Michael Wilcock, the former Director of Pastoral Studies at Trinity College, Bristol, groups Luke’s portrayal of Jesus’s miracles into three periods: early, middle and late[[1]](#footnote-2).

In **the early period, Jesus is establishing his authority** as the Son of Man, as God’s Son here on earth. The miracles cause people to say “[Look!] With authority and power he orders the impure spirits and they come out”.

Michael Wilcock classifies the **middle period as the “good news”** period and his focus shifts from Jesus asserting his authority to asserting the good news of his message.

Today’s reading is the **first of four miracles** that Michael Wilcock classifies as **late period miracles**. **No longer in the crowd**, these are directly aimed at his disciples. In today’s reading there are just the few of them in a boat. The same is true of the following miracles. **Jesus appears to be in teaching mode** with his disciples. So my supposition is that today’s miracle is a deliberate lesson in faith and aimed directly at the disciples. Let’s look at the way the story evolves.

* ‘One day Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side of the lake”’.
* ‘As they sailed, he fell asleep’
* ‘A squall came down on the lake’
* ‘He got up and rebuked the wind’
* ‘”Where is your faith?” he asked his disciples’

Perhaps I am reading too much into this, but no teacher could give for a better lesson in faith; this is classic teaching:

* Here is a problem,
* here is how I deal with it.
* Now you try it.

In this case:

* Preparation of the lesson: “let’s go across the lake”
* Here is the problem for you to solve: there’s a vicious storm threatening the boat;
* Here is how I deal with it: with faith I say the word and calm the storm;
* Now you try it. In Luke’s narrative the disciples get their chance not long after this, at the **start of chapter 9**, when he sends out the Twelve to go and practice their faith for themselves.

But remember that Jesus is not just teaching his disciples. **He is also teaching us.**

Jesus is teaching us three lessons:

1. **Life is never easy: there will always be storms.**
2. **When the storms do come and threaten to sink us, Jesus is there. We just need faith.**
3. **The power of the word, or prayer, is ours to use.**

Taking each of those three in turn:

**Life is never easy**. If it were easy then we wouldn’t learn or even need to learn: there would be no need of faith. Gemma made this point last week and pointed out that the growth in Christian faith is strongest in the world where life is the most challenging. This is bourn out in what Jesus says in the gospels. For example, going back to the beatitudes that we heard last week

* Blessed are you who are poor, …
* Blessed are you who hunger now, …
* Blessed are you who weep now, …
* Blessed are you when people hate you, …

In short: “storms” in whatever form are good for us. They build up the muscles of our faith.

Storms do come. You may have heard me refer to my experience with **the £5 note**. For those who have heard it, my apologies. This was in the 1980s when I had bought my first flat just as interest rates on my mortgage went through the roof and reached 15%. 15% of 2½ times my salary (which is what I paid for my flat) is a lot of money. I was desperate. One day, walking down Queen Street in Maidenhead I prayed “Please God, I am desperate, all I need is £5”. I turned the corner into King Street, and there was £5 on the pavement. (in today’s money that is worth around £20).

Which **leads me to the third point**: the power of the word. It appears throughout the Bible:

* From Genesis where ‘God said “let there be light”’
* Via people like Elisha telling the widow to draw oil from the pot to sell it and it didn’t exhaust until she had what she needed
* To Jesus in numerous places saying the word that make good. For example, rebuking the weather in today’s reading.
* And my favourite quote, from Acts, when Peter says to the lame beggar “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”

**So when we pray, we using the word, we are affecting what happens next**. We are harnessing God. We are changing in some way the events about which we pray. Even in the most momentous times, a prayer said in faith, for example for the troubles in Ukraine, will change something. There have some remarkable miracles from prayer. But I am out of time so they will have to be for another day.

**In today’s reading Jesus is not only teaching his disciples**, he is also directly teaching us:

* We must expect to be **challenged**
* We must have **faith that will let us meet** that challenge
* And with that **faith we can pray in the certainty** that there will be an answer (as I have said on other occasions, if the prayer is personal, then there is no guarantee that the answer is what we want, but it will be what is needed).

And, if **we fall down**, if we get it wrong, there is no recriminations. God picks us up without a word of complaint, dusts us off, and we can try again.

**And that to me is the biggest miracle of all.**

Amen.

1. Wilcock M., 1979, *The Message of Luke*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester [↑](#footnote-ref-2)