

Miracles of Jesus - 6

The Storm and the Madman

The sun was sinking slowly over the Galilean hills, and the disciples turned questioningly towards their Master. It had been a long day of teaching by the waterside. Surely it was time now to dismiss the crowds, and go back to their lodgings for food and rest. When his instruction came, it was unexpected: *“Let us cross over to the other side”* (Mark 4:35).

Perhaps with a hint of resignation, they raised the sails, and took him into the boat. Jesus himself was exhausted. Settling down in the stern, head on the steersman’s cushion, he was soon soothed to sleep by the lapping of waves on timber. The distance across the Sea of Galilee was six or seven miles – a routine run for those professional fishermen, brought up from childhood to sail the lake at night. If they wondered why he had chosen to cross to the inhospitable eastern shore, their curiosity remained unanswered, for he lay wrapped in deep sleep.

A Rude Awakening

Soon, however, the wind swung round to the northeast. The sails strained violently as the breeze stiffened, then flapped hard till they had to be lowered for safety. Avalanching down from Hermon and the heights of Golan, a blast of cold, turbulent air bit into the surface of the shallow lake, like a vast hairdryer suspended over a puddle, raising short, violent, steep, crashing waves that threw the small boat about with dizzy power. It was the



infamous Galilee tempest a fisherman always dreaded, unpredictable, arriving with terrifying speed, and making widows as fast as Roman swords.

A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling (v37).

Courageous and resourceful, the disciples baled fast, but the water smashed repeatedly over the sides. Chilled, drenched, blinded by darkness and spray, they knew they had reached the limit of their strength. There was nothing more they could do.

Amazingly, Jesus himself slept peacefully in the back of the boat. The battering of the waves had no effect on him. If he felt the danger, he did not seem to care. It was too much for the sodden, scared seamen. Exasperated, they shook him awake.

Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? (v38).

Power in Action

Waking up eventually, Jesus called out to the wind and the sea, “Peace, be still!” (v39). Immediately the wind died away, the waves smoothed over, and a great calm fell over the lake. It was incredible. One minute they were staring death in the face, the next it was as if there had never been a storm at all. Were it not for their dripping clothes and the water sloshing around in the boat, it might have been a dream.

Both Mark and Luke remark that the disciples were afraid. Matthew says they marvelled. They were no longer afraid of the storm, but in awe of Jesus himself. They were made aware once more that this man, with whom they were living and travelling, was no ordinary man. He had at his command the power of God.

The psalmist, 1000 years before, had written of helpless mariners in a storm:

Then they cry out to the LORD in their trouble, and He brings them out of their distresses. He calms the storm, so that its waves are still (Psalm 107:28–29).

Here was Jesus, doing just that. They gazed at him with a new respect. He had saved them from death, just by a few words of command. They wondered: “Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” (Matthew 8:27).

Needing Faith

When Jesus first awoke, he had rebuked the disciples: “Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?” (v26).

What are we to make of this? Was it



not a little harsh, when anyone would be terrified in such a storm? His criticism carries a message for all who would be disciples. It was the implications of the situation that counted. They were in grave danger, out in a tiny boat, in darkness, wind and storm. There were no human resources left to them. But Jesus was with them in the boat. Jesus, they all solemnly believed, was the Messiah, who one day will be King of the world. As the chosen of God, he was surely not going to be drowned in a common storm! His life was sacred, cradled in God’s hand. So long as they were with him, they were safe. It was a simple, logical act of faith to believe they would not die, if they stayed in the boat.

But of course, there is a world of difference between believing in the comfort of the fireside, and believing when strength is spent and the storm is all around. That is what faith is all about – believing in God when things go wrong, when the evidence seems to suggest He has forgotten us, and is deaf to our cries. Perhaps that is why Jesus took so much waking up – God was testing their faith, teaching them not to give up, but to have confidence in Him. They would need that faith in later years, faced by howling mobs of

unbelievers, led to execution, dispirited by long gospel marches, or confined in damp prison cells.

We all need to learn to believe that so long as we are with Jesus, the storms of life will ultimately not harm us. And when he comes back again, in the day of his Kingdom, Jesus will silence the angry sea of nations with the same power of God, to bring tranquillity and peace for a thousand years.

A Frightening Sight

Dawn found the boat close to the eastern shore, the craggy hills ahead edged with pink and gold, and the disciples' clothing steaming in the warmth of the early sun. They must have wondered why Jesus had decided to visit Gergesa, peopled by the descendants of Greek settlers who had few links with the Jews.

However, he directed them to a bay with steep cliffs, and stepped firmly out onto the shore.

Hardly had he begun to stride up the beach when there was a hoarse cry, and the shaggy figure of a naked man began to run towards them, strongly built and very frightening. From his bizarre appearance and loud shouts, it was plain the fellow was mentally deranged, and that Jesus was in great danger.

To their amazement however, he ran up to the Master and fell on his knees before him, almost as though he had been expecting Jesus to come. Jesus spoke firmly to the man, addressing him as though a demon had taken possession of him: *"Come out of the man, unclean spirit!"* (Mark 5:8).

The man's reply was instant and clear: *"What have I to do with you, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I*

implore you by God that you do not torment me" (v7).

Talking quietly, Jesus calmed him down.

Then he asked him, "What is your name?" And he answered, saying, "My name is Legion; for we are many" (v9).

Insight from Madness

Mental illness has always troubled human society, and its effects are often strange and frightening. The lack of inhibitions and appearance of the madman, and his choice to live in the cemetery, indicate how unbalanced he was. Though modern medical science has removed the stigma of mental illness, and can prescribe drugs which speed up a return to sanity, the actual causes remain obscure. The sufferer frequently acts as though he or she has become a completely different person, hearing voices and conducting conversations which have no basis in reality.



What about Legion's insight? He may not have met Jesus before, but he could well have heard about him while begging for food. He recognised him as the one who could make him better. But in line with the thinking of the times, which insisted unclean spirits



could not exist in a vacuum, he now begged Jesus to transfer the demons into a vast herd of pigs, busily rooting up the pasture on top of a nearby cliff.

It would have been useless for Jesus to have explained carefully that demons do not really exist, and that Beelzebub, the lord of the demons, was a human invention (as he had earlier told the Pharisees when they used the same theory against him). The man believed in the traditional explanation for his illness, and needed to be cured in a way that would convince him he was better. The disciples watched in astonishment as, with a word of command from Jesus, hundreds of the animals rushed towards the cliff and fell into the sea.

The sequel to this dramatic healing, which is vividly reported in the gospels, is sad but telling. Streaming out to check for themselves the report of the strange behaviour of the pigs, the city dwellers found the former madman sitting quietly at Jesus' feet, fully clothed and perfectly normal. They heard how Legion had been cured at the expense of their precious livestock, and, frightened of what might happen next, begged Jesus to go away.

Instead of contemplating the blessing that had come to a member of their community, and the implication that the great teacher from Nazareth had indeed come from God, they shut their ears and thought about their

profits. It is easy to have the same distorted priority today.

Love in Action

There was no point in stopping. Jesus and the disciples sailed back across the lake. But as they returned to another busy day on a familiar shore, the disciples were left to reflect on the all-possessing love which had driven Jesus, weary to the bone, to sail across the lake and back through that long dark night, for the sake of Legion, the man who needed his healing power.

That same love still acts today, as Jesus calls through the words of scripture and the work of disciples. Many other 'lost' men and women are drawn from the darkness of death and the nakedness of sin to find new life in him. Legion was left behind as the boat sailed away, to obey Jesus' command:

"Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you." And he departed and began to proclaim in Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him; and all marvelled (v19–20).

Once again, as in the previous miracles we have examined, every reaction of the onlookers to the presence of Jesus accords perfectly with human nature, and convinces us that Matthew, Mark and Luke wrote down the truth. Their message fills us with wonder, awe and hope as we marvel with them at the miracles of the Lord.

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(Concluded)