

This week another reminder of human frailty. A disaster that cannot be attributed to one human being. The explosion in Beirut has claimed many tens of lives and has injured thousands. A city is reeling at the impact of a devastating blast. There is anger and there is violence, protest in the streets and political tension. There are no adequate words that we can find to describe our feelings.

We will pray for the people of Beirut and for the city later, but the events of Wednesday 5th August remind us of humanity's powerlessness against tragedy. We might have the capability to do extraordinary things with technology. We might be able to understand the minutiae of a sub-atomic particle or be able to describe parts of the universe that the human eye cannot see, but we do not have the power to stop accidents happening, control organisations and groups, bring peace to a needy world or feed the hungry in developing nations.

In our readings this morning we encounter individuals who were powerless to respond to powerful forces beyond themselves in the life of the world.

First of all, there was Elijah. He was washed out, exhausted, at the end of his tether. He had run out of personal resources to respond to Queen Jezebel's threat on his life. He'd overcome the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and fled for his life. Fearful, feeling sorry for himself, a failure - and that is all probably understated! His vocation was shattered, his identity as a prophet of Israel was broken. He sat under a broom tree and asked God to take away his life. Elijah is past caring.

God had other ideas. God fed him, nurtured him, rested him. It was a journey to God and led by God. He came to Mount Horeb or Sinai as we know it in the desert and mountains are never in the scripture's insignificant places, and that's where our Old Testament reading picks up the story.

We'll come back to Elijah in a moment because then we are given the image of the disciples huddled together in that small boat. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin had died but Jesus had continued with his teaching ministry - the kingdom of heaven as a mustard seed that grows into an enormous tree that shelters the nations of the world, the lost treasure, the pearl of great price. As the crowds flocked to see the sick healed, they were hungry and much to the astonishment of the disciples five fish and two loaves fed 5,000.

Not surprisingly Jesus needs some personal space, sends the disciples across the lake in their boat, and as we were reminded last week 'fled for the hills' to

pray. In the fourth watch, between 3am and 6pm, the Sea of Galilee did what it seemed to do so often and host the most colossal of storms. It was the darkest hour of the night. The disciples were terrified. They were subject to elemental forces they could not control.

So whether it's in the face of political forces we cannot control or the forces of nature we are invited to engage with how our experiences of being powerless in our modern world impacts on us, how we respond as Christian disciples and what God's call to us is.

Go back to Elijah. In the history of Israel, the great prophet Moses on the same mountain encountered God in the midst of the storm and in fire. Yet now God reveals himself in 'the sound of sheer silence'. It's as if the storm and the fire and wind obscured God's voice. Elijah had to learn a new thing. God is the one in control of the natural world. God our creator has complete power over the storm and the fire and the wind, and even the silence.

Elijah's vocation and identity were restored. Elijah was able to hear the promises and reassurance of God in the midst of his depression – there would be a remnant left and God's purposes would be fulfilled.

What might God be whispering to us today and will we have the spiritual depth to hear what he says in the midst of the storms of life which toss us to and fro?

The disciples' vision is dim, confused, unfocused. Jesus was a ghostly figure walking towards them. You would have thought they would have been delighted to see the one whom they were getting to know. Here was the creator of the universe in human form and yet they almost didn't recognise him.

I wonder who is Jesus for us? Is he a ghostly figure that we don't in fact want to recognise, someone who makes us afraid? Is Jesus is fantasy figure who floats in and out of our imaginations and who never quite takes root? Maybe like the disciples in the midst of things we cannot control we have ambivalent feelings towards him.

Yet, the Gospel is clear about who Jesus is. He is Immanuel, 'God with us' and this is one of Matthew's great overarching themes. His name shall be called Immanuel, says the angel Gabriel to Joseph in his dream. He is the one who is 'God is with us'.

So here is the Saviour of the World coming towards the disciples huddled below the prow of the small boat. God who makes his home with human beings always takes the initiative. God in Jesus walks towards us, and we then walk towards him. This is the dynamic of the Christian life.

Think of our experience of baptism. Many of us were baptised as infants. Lying helpless, unable to reach out for ourselves, in the priest's arms God reaches out to us before we can ever reach out to him. We live in response to God's first action towards us as we die and rise with him each day of our lives. God reaches out, we respond. God loves us and we can only love him in return.

Look at the figure of Peter, undoubtedly for St Matthew the leader of the apostle, after the resurrection to be the leader of the group in Jerusalem. 'Lord, save me', he says as he sinks. Peter as so always is used as a way of helping us understand the life of faith. More realistically the life of faith is all mixed up with fear and doubt because for us all they are both part of our daily experience.

Sometimes we can think we have it sorted. It can feel as though we are 'walking on water'. Yet a distraction, a trip along the way can reveal to us where our heart is really focused. When that happens, we can only reach out our hand and grasp our Lord's hand which is already there stretched out to us. It's then that we realise our faith can only be described as 'little faith'. We still have a long way to go as disciples. We are learners along the way.

Peter wanted to imitate Jesus, that was his impulse and it could be ours. Jesus brought peace and love, as well as challenge and critique to those whom he met and the communities he engaged with. Peter jumping out of the boat signalled his desire to do what Jesus did, to follow him in his ministry. Yet, in the moment he looked down he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the wind.

Peter allowed the storm to disturb his focus and that is also how the Christian life is shaped. We step out in response to Jesus coming towards us. We stumble yet know that grace means the hand of God is there to pull us back and set us back on our feet. That is what it means to die in the waters of baptism so that we will one day with the risen Christ experience the resurrection. Meanwhile, each day we anticipate the final resurrection in the grace of God whose hand is there helping us on – not once but time and time again.

So, this morning we allow the disciples' experience of God in the boat on Galilee to help us grasp the shape of our Christian lives. We can take away Peter as a model of faith to encourage us along the way. Like Elijah, let us be prepared to hear God's voice in the unexpected moment so that we can find our vocation restored and our identity as God's children re-constructed.

Most of all we are reminded this morning of the good news of the Gospel that God works in the midst of our fear, amidst those things we can have no control over. We can trust that God will be working today in the lives of the citizens of Beirut. To be a disciple is to be defined by God's faithfulness towards us not by the fear of the world or what we are powerless to change. And it all begins as we watch for the God revealed in Jesus who comes to meet us and to whom we respond in faith.