

“Crossing to the other side” a sermon based on Mark4:35-41 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 24 June 2018.

Stormy trips

He was 45 or so, not unhealthy. Then one night, he had severe chest pains. The kind he had read about relating to a heart attack. He wondered what would happen if he died, not what would happen to him, that did not concern him, but what would happen to his family, his wife and children. In hospital he began to see his body in a different way. No longer entirely his own. Doctors and nurses and others showed respect, certainly, but with all the testing and treating, the prodding and puncturing, his body passed from him, in a sense. And like driving a car that had once broken down inexplicably, he saw his body less confidently now. That feeling of uncertainty surfaced from time to time – the skin cancer that needed excision, the cartilage he tore, the pain in the chest. He noticed others making similar transitions. Arthritis limiting movement. Rotator cuffs and disabled shoulders. Stretched muscles. Strained backs. Twisted ankles. People learning to live in bodies different from the ones they had known. In some cases changing their major interest or occupation. Giving up work. Relinquishing sport. Taking time off. These less robust bodies raised questions of identity – who were they now? Living with more uncertainty.

Stormy trips.

It happens to people in relationships, perhaps most strikingly when a long relationship ends. People may see themselves related to the other. Not defined by the other, but in relationship with the other. They were often introduced as a couple. People spoke of one, then of the other. They each had someone to talk with, to walk with, to wonder with, to be at home with. Indeed the relationship represented home in its best sense. And then one left, one died, one departed. The remaining person did not change, and yet they did. Part of who they were was no more. And they found themselves living with a new uncertainty.

Stormy trips.

Today is Refugee Sunday. In the north east of Sri Lanka, with a Sri Lankan minister, I visited a fisherman who lived down a side street, just off the beach, away from government scrutiny, because the government did not want us meeting people like

this man. It was a fishing region - boats drawn up on the beach, nets drying, the paraphernalia of fishing. We spent time talking over a cup of tea. His son had gone south, paid some people an exorbitant amount of money, avoided the local police, and begun the journey to Australia by boat. The father had not heard from him since – over a year now - and wondered if we could find him. “Why had he paid so much and make this treacherous trip over thousands of kilometres knowing that many people die on the way?” we asked. Because it had to be better than the life he had here. The son had taken the journey millions take over land and sea to uncertainty only to find that the fear felt by the country to which they travelled, the determination to keep out the other, the false security of borders, led to high walls and barbed wire fences and every deterrent possible. Those who could offer hospitality unwilling to risk the stormy sea of encountering the other.

Congregations are making stormy trips. As society changes, as generations emerge, we find ourselves taken to unfamiliar territory and uncertain ways of being and witnessing.

Stormy trips

Last week, the Pope made a journey to Geneva, to the World Council of Churches, the body that represents major Protestant denominations in the world. He made another strong commitment to unity:

“We human beings are constantly on the move. Throughout our lives, we are called to set out and keep walking: from our mother’s womb and at every stage of life, from when we first leave home to the day we depart from this earthly existence. The metaphor of walking reveals the real meaning of our life, a life that is not self-sufficient but always in search of something greater. Our hearts spur us to keep walking, to pursue a goal. Walking is a discipline; it takes effort. It requires patience and exercise, day after day. We have to forego many other paths in order to choose the one that leads to the goal. We have to keep that goal constantly before us, lest we go astray. Remembering the goal. Walking also demands the humility to be prepared at times, when necessary, to retrace our steps. It also involves being concerned for our traveling companions, since only in company do we make good progress. Walking, in a word, demands constant conversion. That is why so many people refuse to do it. They prefer to remain in the quiet of their home, where it is easy to manage their affairs without facing the risks of travel. But that is to cling to a

momentary security, incapable of bestowing the peace and joy for which our hearts yearn. That joy and peace can only be found by going out from ourselves.”

“Let us go across to the other side”, Jesus said.

Startling words. The first time the Jesus movement ventures toward gentile land. The other side represents hostile territory, people presumed undeserving of salvation. The followers of Jesus are invited to detach themselves from the familiar shores of Capernaum for the strange, foreign shores of the Gerasenes.

Where do we anchor our faith - on the security of familiar shores or in the journeying Jesus?

The disciples knew success on the familiar shore – this was where they had been called, had found direction - Peter, Andrew, James, and John. This is where they had worked, heard the parables, experienced healings, enjoyed his company, saw others turn to him.

And now he was asking them to leave the familiar for the unknown, the untested, the more risky. God was anchoring God’s presence in the encounter with others. The presence of Jesus was tied to the unfamiliar, to crossing the stormy sea, to being curious of others.

Jesus is inviting us to the other side, where stigmatized, marginalized, and demonized people live. Shores populated by others. God’s work finds its root in our encounters with others. Whether they come to us or we go to them.

As one writer put it:

“What life do we miss when we seclude ourselves on shores of safety and sameness? We have to choose the shaky boat with Jesus, hurling through uncharted waters toward the dense unknown, over the insulated shores where things make sense and our hearts shrink.”

In the midst of the storm is the one who sleeps, not through indifference but through trust that this is God’s way. Here is the one who speaks peace to what is most fearful and disturbing. Here is the eternal companion whose trust in God enables him to rest and to rebuke.

He doesn’t wear a coat that says “I don’t really care. Do u?” He cares so much that he invites us to take startling journeys to the other side, where life is less certain, less familiar. “Let us go across to the other side.”

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