

Faith, Doubt and the Experience of God's Absence - Reverend Hans Christiansen – Sunday 21 June 2009

Reading: Mk 4:35-41

Have you ever had the experience that God was absent?

Have you ever thought that perhaps God wasn't really there at all and that, despite your faith, despite the witness of your faith community, despite the scriptures and sacraments, you just couldn't feel and find God's presence?

If you have felt like that, or perhaps feel like that now, then today's Gospel symbolically understood will speak directly into your experience.

As the boat (which is a symbol of our lives) in the gospel is about to sink, Jesus is asleep in the stern, apparently totally oblivious to the dire situation. Does that sound familiar? Many of you have lived many decades with a deep faith, and yet I'm sure you, like me, have had periods of doubts and periods when God seemed absent, when God seemed asleep or gone, haven't you? And yet we don't often speak much of our doubt in Church do we?

The disciples are terrified for their master is not awake with them. Until they have woken him up they live in the terrifying moment on the black sea with the fear that perhaps they will perish. Don't we all know that experience so well?

Sometimes God in our lived experience is absent, asleep. Of course God is never really absent, but it feels like it doesn't it? It can be very frightening to have those feelings because it can shake the foundations of our faith and often we hide those feelings not only from each other but also from ourselves. And yet we all go through it.

We all like a firm and un-wavering faith, which leaves little or no room for doubt and the experience of God's absence. But a faith like that can't last a whole life-time. A faith that does not embrace the occasional feeling of God's absence is for most people simply not true to our experience, not is it true to the gospel.

Today's gospel story, as always, is honest about our feelings.

The gospel of Mark was written in a time of violent persecutions of Christians. It was probably written in Rome just after the emperor Nero had killed hundreds of Christians and hung their heads on poles in Rome. That experience certainly would elicit doubt and fear in the young Christian community in Rome.

Why didn't Jesus come to the rescue, they probably would have asked in their prayers and discussion?

Don't we all somewhere inside of us ask those sorts of questions when we are in pain or when loved ones are in pain? And don't we all from time to time, even with the deepest faith, struggle to find God presence?

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me", Christ cried on the cross. Christ himself experienced the feeling of God's absence on the cross.

And yet in this cry Christ reveals, paradoxically, God's presence even in the midst of doubt and darkness.

It is from Jesus' experience on the cross and the revelation of God's presence even in the midst of doubt that a long and noble theological tradition began within the Christian faith which argues that spiritual darkness, doubt and the experience of God's absence is to be expected and indeed welcomed as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

To doubt God's presence and lose a sense of God's presence for a while is in fact, as tradition holds it, a necessary purification of the self and the self's image of God, which can lead to a deeper relationship with God.

St John of the Cross who lived in the 16th century is perhaps the most celebrated teacher of what has come to be known as 'the dark night of the soul'. St John writes poetically from his own experience when he was imprisoned, that God's way of moving the soul to a closer relationship with God's self, is through leading us through a period where one loses all sense of God's presence.

This movement, St John says, is, much like the Hebrew people's wandering in the desert for forty years, a movement towards a *deeper trust* and a more *profound faith* – a faith which no matter what happens, no matter how far God seems away or asleep – knows beyond feeling that God is present in the depth of oneself and in the depth of all things.

In modern times with the use of psychological language, the great theologian Paul Tillich reflects on faith accompanied by doubt. Tillich insisted that faith without doubt and darkness is in fact no faith at all, it is mere intellectual dogma.

Real dynamic faith, he says, always carries within it doubt.

Doubt is the energy of faith. Doubt is the prompting questions, which so often gives us life and energy, moves us on, and prompts us to change. Notice that the disciples wake up Jesus in today's story with the words of doubt: don't you care that we are perishing? And it is from that action of doubt that Jesus wakes and calms the storm.

As the French monk Pierre Abelard wrote a thousand years ago:

"The beginning of wisdom is found in doubting; by doubting we come to the question, and by seeking we may come upon the truth."

Most recently Mother Teresa has become, probably unwillingly, a great exponent of a faith that encompasses doubt and the experience of God's absence. As you probably know it was discovered in her diaries, that Mother Teresa who radiated God's love and presence to millions of people, often herself felt starved of God's presence. Much of her life, so faithfully lived in devotion to God and the poor, was in fact lived with an aching longing for God's presence, which she often could not feel.

And yet Mother Teresa in her own spiritual doubts and darkness remained faithful and full of faith and action. So often we do the same. We live with spiritual aching but keep living by faith.

"Faith is a conviction of things not seen", as it says in the beginning of the litany of faith in Hebrews Ch11.

We don't know God's mysterious ways. Sometimes we sense God, sometimes we don't. Real faith includes doubt. They are like twins. Repressed doubt only creates fear. Acknowledged doubt inspires courage and energy.

To launch out into the sea of faith and keep sailing by faith is an act of courage, yet as we get more and more accustomed to God's ways then even the darkness of doubt and feelings of God's absence can become signs of God's deeper presence in the boats of our lives.

Let me end with these beautiful words from the poet Rabindranath Tagore, which expresses well the presence of darkness within faith:

“Faith is like a bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark.”

Amen.

Hans Christiansen