

So finally, after feeding and dismissing the crowds, Jesus gets that time off he so desperately needed at the start of last week's reading, by going up a mountain by himself to pray through the night. Meanwhile, his disciples go on ahead by boat to the other side of the sea.

The phrase that stands out to me from today's reading is this: *"the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them."* The disciples had been out there for hours just trying to get across the sea, being buffeted and slammed by waves and pushed back from their destination by a strong wind.

The little phrase "the wind was against them" reminds me of the farmer in the parable who looks out on the weeds that had been sown among his good wheat crop and says, "an enemy has done this." Often in life, we have good and simple intentions that seem to be undermined and thwarted by forces well beyond our control. Sometimes, of course, we sabotage our own efforts through mistakes or poor planning or some kind of lapse of attention or character. But a lot of the time, the thing we're trying to do just gets hammered, pushed against, disrupted or thwarted by circumstances that seem hell-bent on discouraging us and causing us to fail.

Today, this reading feels to me like a word for the church in the current season of cultural rejection of and disinterest in religion. We continue to have faith and to desire to glorify God and serve others just as we have always done. And yet, it seems that the wind is against us.

Sure, the Church has made heaps of mistakes and can sometimes be our own worst enemy. I'm not claiming persecution here. Many people have left the wider church because of hypocrisy, judgementalism and narrowness, and the blame lies with us.

But we also live in a time where society has radically changed around the church – basic assumptions about the spiritual basis of reality are no longer shared; consumerism, technology and hyper-busyness distract us and compete for our attention and priorities and values. It has now become axiomatic in our culture in the West that there is no God, and that religious doctrine is a human construction designed for some people to gain power over others.

These are the waves that are battering our small boat and the wind that is against us as we struggle to carve out space in our lives to pursue prayer and community, holiness and worship.

We can spend a lot of time analysing the waves and the wind, and it's right that we do so. We need to understand well the times that we're in. Sometimes I think that one of the main reasons why Anglican churches in particular haven't thrived across the last half century or more is complacency. We were too enmeshed in a culture that we thought was broadly Christian and aligned with our religious sensibility. We assumed our young people would grow up and take their place as adults in the churches we'd cared for over the years.

We haven't had a strong enough awareness of the struggle we're in. We haven't accounted for what we used to call "the world, the flesh and the devil," and how powerful these energies are in undermining faith. It's important to know that we are in a small boat in a strong wind, not an ocean cruiser insulated from the weather and the waves.

But there's only so much to be gained from focusing on the wind.

Early in the morning Jesus comes walking towards the disciples on the water. This is literally 'in the fourth watch of the night,' meaning between 3 and 6am. Jesus has been praying since before evening fell, and he lets the disciples struggle away for several hours before he comes to them. In another, similar story Jesus sleeps in the boat while the disciples battle with a tremendous storm. In both of these stories, when Jesus decides the time is right, the wind and storms stop, and the boat can get to its destination. The struggle calls for faith and patience. God is still in command of the wind and waves, but help doesn't always come when *we* think it's needed.

In our story, Peter is suddenly gripped by the belief that he can step out of the boat and join Jesus walking on the water. Do you remember what causes him to sink? It's not that he suddenly thinks 'I've never walked on water before, this is crazy, I'm going to drown.' Not immediately, anyway. The passage says, "when he *noticed the strong wind*, he became frightened." That's when he started to sink.

When we pay too much attention to the wind and let the setbacks and the obstacles frighten us, that's when we start to get that sinking feeling, and we become even more certain that we're going to be overwhelmed.

That's what happened to Elijah in today's first reading. He has escaped from people who have turned against their religion and want to kill him as a prophet of a God they have rejected. He's hiding in a cave, convinced that he's the only faithful one left in the whole country. He's traumatised and depressed. He can only see everything that's ranged against him. But God, speaking out of the silence, gives him his next right steps forward, and assures him that there are still seven thousand faithful ones in Israel whose knees haven't bowed to the idol Baal. Not very many, but enough for God. It's not as bad as he thinks, and God is well ahead of him with a plan.

When we're tempted to see only the wind and the waves, and to wonder whether it's worthwhile trying to keep our small boat afloat when it's such a struggle, we need to do what Jesus did – head up a mountain and pray until the same voice from the silence that Elijah heard came to restore and revive him.

We need to do what Peter did when he first stepped out of the boat, which is to keep our eyes on Jesus Christ. Instead of looking at the wind we fix our attention on his beauty and goodness. Our hunger and thirst should be for more and more of Jesus' presence and fullness in our lives as we pray and worship and grow in faith. Our desire should be to manifest the presence of the Christ, for the kingdom of heaven to be revealed in us, as we use the gifts the Spirit has given us to build communities anchored in the love of God and the power of God.

*What does this look like? We're going to listen to God about that together. On the screen is a question - What does it look like, in practice, for the church to act in faith, focusing fully on Jesus, even in this time when we are battered by waves and the wind is against us?*

*What are the practices of a people who are keeping our attention on Jesus, and putting one foot in front of the other on choppy waters?*

*We'll take some time to ponder on that – on our own, with others...you can be silent or talk with those near you – however you best hear God. When you've landed on a response to this question, go to the table, grab a post-it note and write down what has emerged for you.*

*Take your post-it and stick it up on the glass window by the font. Read what others have written. See if you can hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. After the service I will gather up your thoughts and share them in Friday's leaflet, so please make them legible!*

*Keep pondering during the week and feel free to drop me a line with further promptings.*

*Track: Oceans (where feet may fail)*