

Thoughts On A Most Unusual Boat. - A Meditation

There is a boat that appears a number of times in the Gospel of Mark. It serves as a mode of transportation for Jesus and the disciples during their Galilean ministry. At one point it gets caught up in a powerful storm and was about to be swamped while Jesus was asleep in the stern. At another time the disciples were out on the boat, and Jesus was back on land. And then, there is the time when they were all in the boat, and the disciples were complaining that they had no bread. To better understand what this boat stands for it is important to keep in mind that the authors of the four gospels were writing at times when the early church was facing great persecutions and tribulations, and that their gospels not only told Jesus' story, but also addressed the situations facing their congregations, and sometimes through symbolic means. It has often been suggested that in this case the boat becomes a symbol of the Church.

In the first instance the boat, i.e., the Church, was being battered by a great storm in the form of persecution. In the second we are told that the disciples "were straining at the oars against an adverse wind". Again, the Church in a time of great struggle. In both cases Jesus appears to be oblivious to what is happening - but is he really? As the boat is rocked by the great storm the disciples cry out to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? (Might we interpret this as prayer?) I'm sure there were times when the early congregations were convinced, they were perishing. In the boat Jesus wakes up, rebukes the wind creating a dead calm. He then admonishes the disciples for their lack of faith.

In the second story, as the disciples' strain to move forward Jesus comes walking to them on the water, and tells them not to be afraid, but they did not understand because their "hearts were hardened".

In the first case, Jesus responds to their plea, even when it seemed to them that he was unaware of their plight. In the second, he comes to them in a very unexpected way. In our own time when there are so many congregations struggling, feeling swamped or straining against "adverse winds", does it sometimes feel that Jesus is unaware, and do we have the faith to expect answers to come in unexpected ways?

But what about the disciple's complaint in the third story that they have no bread? The story says that the disciples had forgotten to bring bread, but there was one loaf in the boat. Their complaint was particularly frustrating for Jesus, considering that he had just fed four thousand people with seven loaves and a few fish. He says to them, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?"

What are they failing to see or hear? Could it be that the "one loaf" is not really bread? Could it be that the "one loaf" is, in fact, Jesus himself? Could it be that this story is actually saying something about Holy Communion? After all, didn't Jesus say in the sixth chapter of John, "I am the bread of life!"

When we come together for the Lord's Supper, and the bread is broken and the fruit of the vine is poured, what do we see and what do we hear? Roman Catholics believe that the bread and wine actually becomes the body and blood of Jesus, (transubstantiation); High Church Anglicans believe in the Real Presence, that Jesus is not in the bread and wine, but "with" the elements, (consubstantiation); in our Reformed tradition we often see the Eucharist as an act of remembrance. But what are we remembering? Are we simply remembering something that took place a long time ago, or is it bringing to mind something much deeper and more present? Are we remembering just with our minds, or are we also remembering with our hearts? As Jesus asked his disciples, "Do you not yet understand?"