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### **Still Point (Mark 4. 35-41)**

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One of the most perplexing issues for contemporary believers is the question of 'divine action'. How does God act in the world? I have difficulty taking seriously, for example, an idea of God who intervenes on demand to find me a parking spot or retrieve my lost keys (though that doesn't always stop me asking!). But what about the idea of a God who acts to heal the sick, restore relationship, transform a social landscape? The bible tells story after story of such things occurring. Yet I imagine many of us have known times when we longed for 'God' to 'do' something, to 'act' to change things, and seemingly nothing has happened. The illness of a loved one inexorably takes its course; a relationship remains unreconciled; politics goes on with little sign of transformation.

So how are we to imagine God acting in the world? This is the question I find myself pondering as we work our way through this part of Mark's gospel. Last week, you may remember, we reflected on the nature of divine action in the light of Jesus' parables comparing God to a sower who sows seed, whose seed grows in a hidden way, 'how we do not know', from the tiniest of beginnings (like a mustard seed) into a large shrub in which the birds of the air make nests. In these analogies, Jesus speaks of the work of God in terms of natural processes. And I quoted Rowan Williams suggesting this tells us something about how God characteristically acts, 'not with thunderclaps; not with immensely dramatic and instantaneous interventions'.<sup>1</sup> Rather, on this account, God acts from the 'within' of things, 'subtly, slowly, from the very depth of being'. This resonates for me – with my experience and my theology.

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014), p.41.

Yet this week we're presented with a story that seems to suggest a different understanding. Jesus is said to exercise power over the forces of nature, rebuking and quelling the wind and the waves. He calms the storm, no less – and if he can do that, then, why can't a bit more divine sovereignty be exercised over the chaos of our world and the confusion in our lives? The disciples' question might equally be ours: 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' (Mark 4.38). For God's sake, *do something!*

Well, let me approach this issue by coming back to the general question of how God acts. It's a bit of a theological detour, but if you can bear with me, I hope it will ultimately help! I said earlier that the question of divine action – conceived in terms of supernatural 'intervention' – is particularly perplexing for contemporary, scientifically-minded people. But it turns out it isn't just a modern problem. The classical tradition of Christian theology has always said that imagining God acting in a series of interventions in the life of the world is untenable.

The basic argument goes like this. If you think of God as acting episodically, doing first this thing and then another, or if you think of God as 'reacting' to anything, then what you're imagining is divine action 'determined by something other than itself', action that reacts to circumstances.<sup>2</sup> If we think of God like this, then God becomes nothing more than a bigger version of us – 'an agent in an environment, who must "negotiate"' in relation to what else is going on<sup>3</sup> – a God who can perhaps be persuaded or pressured by prayer to 'act' differently. But God is not an agent in an environment as we are; not an actor among actors like the gods of Greek mythology. Rather, in classical Christian theology, God simply is that reality on which the reality of everything else depends.<sup>4</sup> And, God's being and action are identical. God cannot 'do' other than God 'is'. This means that God cannot be conceived as deciding to intervene from time to time in particular circumstances, or

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<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), p.267.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, p.267.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, p.268.

as changing God's mind according to some inscrutable 'will', because God is only ever being and acting God's self.

But if that's how classical theology understands God's action and relation to the world, then how are we to talk about divine action in particular? How are we to make any sense of the way the bible speaks of God doing 'a new thing', including sending God's Son to be born among us? The answer, says Williams, can only be in terms of the character of the world that exists because God is as God is; the character of a world that is created by and rests on love, mercy, reconciling hope. If there are occasions where we want to speak of a particular 'act of God', this is not because God has suddenly done something different, suddenly interrupted the created order, but because the created order has become more transparent to, or receptive to the continuous act of God's presence and purpose.<sup>5</sup> It's as if, you might say, a particular set of circumstances, a particular openness in certain people has allowed the underlying act of God to 'break through' in a new way. This is a kind of miracle. But, as St Augustine insisted, it's not a miracle in the sense of 'a direct divine intervention', so much as 'an extraordinary realisation of possibilities' already inherent in the world God has made.<sup>6</sup>

Well, I said it was a bit dense – and it may seem a long way from seeds sprouting and Jesus snoozing in the stern of the boat. But let me try to draw some threads together and to say how I think this matters for us.

How does God act in the world? Last week, I said the parables of the sower and seeds suggested that God characteristically acts from the within of things, as if there's an energy available to those receptive to God's Spirit and Word, that transforms lives and situations from the inside, enabling growth, fruitfulness, generativity. If we seek healing in our lives, our relationships and our society, then we ourselves must become places where this work [this act] of God 'can start to blossom and expand'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, p.269.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, p.269.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, p.43.

The story of Jesus calming the storm looks at first glance rather different – as if Jesus does fix the disciples’ problem by some miraculous interruption to the natural course of things. But let’s look again. What strikes me as the heart of this narrative is the depiction of Jesus ‘in the stern of the boat, asleep on the cushion’ as the chaos of the waves beat the vessel and the disciples react with rising panic. Often, Jesus’ slumber is said to represent his trust in the Father. One commentator writes: ‘When Hebrews thought that God had forsaken them, they said that God “slept” ... When Jesus sleeps in the storm, it is an image of his complete trust in God’s sustaining care ... in contrast to the “no faith” of the disciples’.<sup>8</sup> Maybe that’s right, though I wonder if it’s more that just as when Israel is in trouble, they think God is asleep, so when the disciples are full of fear, they blame Jesus for being asleep; they ascribe to him a lack of ‘care’.

But what if Jesus being asleep here is best read neither as negligence, nor merely as a model of trust in God, but as precisely what allows for the power of divine action, the power of the divine life, to break through? Jesus does not act from *outside* this situation. He is very much in the midst of it – but he’s in it in a radically different way to the others. He’s in it as a still point, at rest in God. And it’s his stillness, his resting in God, that enables him to be radically differentiated from the tumult and for the *peace* of God to break through, utterly undiminished by the chaos and utterly free with respect to it.

American poet and activist, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, wrote: ‘If you study the physics of a waterspout, you will see that the outer vortex whirls far more quickly than the inner one. To calm the storm means to quiet the outer layer, to cause it, by whatever countervailing means, to swirl much less, to more evenly match the velocity of the inner, far less volatile core — till whatever has been lifted into such a vicious funnel falls back to Earth, lays down, is peaceable again’.<sup>9</sup> And, in her ‘Letter

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<sup>8</sup> Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2002), p.59.

<sup>9</sup> Clarissa Pinkola Estes, ‘Letter to a Young Activist in Troubled Times’, <http://www.taranicholle.com/clarissa-pinkola-estes-letter-to-a-young-activist-in-troubled-times-full/> (accessed 17 June 2021).

to a Young Activist in Troubled Times', she continues: 'One of the most important steps you can take to help calm the storm is to not allow yourself to be taken in a flurry of overwrought emotion or despair — thereby accidentally contributing to the swale and the swirl ... Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely'.

How does God act? From the parables of the sower and the seeds, we glimpse that God acts from the within of things as fecundity, enabling growth and maturation in those who open themselves to receive. From the calming of the storm, we glimpse that God acts from the within of things as the still-point, the indefeasible peace and rest that is ever present, ever available to break through the chaos and confusion of the world, if only we dare connect and entrust ourselves to it.

We all know how hard this is in practice — how our own and others' agitation can swamp us, make us fearful and reactive. So this is what our meditation is about — inviting us over and over again beneath the tumult of our thoughts and the terrors of this age into the still, compassionate heart of God — not so as to escape the problems of the world, but so as to become, in and with Christ, agents of their transformation. Or, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian saint, Seraphim of Sarov, so beautifully put it: 'Be at peace, and thousands around you will find salvation'.