

In this morning's gospel we have the story of Jesus encouraging the disciples to set off in a new direction. It is thought that Jesus was in one of the disciples' boats teaching the people when he suggested that they go to the other side of the lake. Mark tells us that, "they took him with them in the boat, just as he was" and that he was "in the stern, asleep on the cushion."

Jesus appears to have had every confidence in the disciples' ability to negotiate the journey to the other side of the lake. He would have known that they were professional fishermen and that their livelihoods relied on their ability to negotiate the waters of the sea.

The storm that threatened to engulf the boat must have been extraordinary because it unnerved these seasoned sailors. They turned to Jesus the non-sailor to intervene. One commentary suggests that perhaps they wanted Jesus to bail water out of the boat.

Having roused Jesus they berated him saying' "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" After rebuking the wind he said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Jesus seemed to be suggesting that the disciples had no need to fear because he was with them. They had heard him proclaim the good news and had witnessed many miracles and yet when they ran into turbulent waters anxiety took over.

Life presents us with many situations where we can feel anxious. Situations that are unfamiliar are anxiety producing for many of us.

Like the Israelites who escaped slavery in Egypt we can sometime feel we would prefer the known; even when the known is unpleasant, to the unknown.

The Israelites vented their anger at Moses "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" they

said; even though God had promised to lead them to the Promised Land.

We are on a journey. You no longer have the security of the leadership offered by your former rector and now have others steering the boat or leading your pilgrimage; depending on the analogy you would like to use.

In the gospel account Jesus slept quietly in the stern because he had confidence in the ability of the disciples, together with his heavenly Father's oversight and protection to bring them safely to their destination.

You do well to similarly trust your leadership team under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to keep us safe and guide you to your destination. My role in all this is to simply encourage you.

This is not my journey. Neither is it the journey of Father X or Father Y who was your rector. This is

your journey. What lies on the other side of the lake or in the Promised Land is for you to discover.

Moses led the people out of Egypt and accompanied them through the desert but was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. That was for others.

Your past rectors are just that; they are past. They are a part of your history. They may well have played important roles in helping you to arrive at where you are today.

You wouldn't be who you are without the contribution that they individually and collectively have made. But this stage of your life together and your future belongs to you and to others.

It is my privilege to accompany you for part of the way. But it is your journey, not my journey. My role will come to an end. Your journey will continue under the leadership you have put in

place from this faith community and the priest you will call to accompany you into the future.

If that seems too daunting we can draw comfort from the Old Testament story of David, the young shepherd boy who with sticks and stones faced the might of the Philistine warrior.

David was clearly up against a formidable opponent. Goliath was the Philistine champion. He was armed to the teeth; whereas David had little to protect him save a handful of stones and a staff.

But he went forth confident that God would not only protect him but would allow him to overcome his much stronger and more experienced opponent.

David stuck to what he knew. He chose not to put on the armour, or use the sword the King provided. He chose instead his familiar tools;

which included the power of prayer to overcome adversaries.

I believe there is much to be said for adopting a similar strategy. We do well to stick to what we know.

We are often seduced into thinking that we need to be doing things that are very different to what we are presently doing if we are to have a future.

Whilst it is true that none of us is the person we were last year, the year before that and the year before that. And that the world we live in is radically different to the world we lived in twenty years ago. And that the rate of change gets faster by the minute.

It is also true that we are essentially the same persons, with the same hopes, dreams and needs. The Anglican Church in general and St Paul's Ipswich in particular has a distinctive part to play in the world and in this community.

It is that distinctive contribution that only this faith community can offer that is vital to the wellbeing of humankind and the people of Ipswich. There are all manner of other churches but only one St Paul's.

There are many ways of worshipping God and being the people of God but there is no other community like this community. Trying to be someone or something you are not is a recipe for failure.

Renewing and refreshing your sense of vision and direction;

- reclaiming your sense of awe and wonder at the presence of God in your midst,
- rediscovering the excitement you once felt when you came to know the Lord,
- taking seriously the command of our Lord to love one another;
- in other words being the people of God in this place,

will give you a sense of peace and stability and a sense of meaning and purpose for your lives.

The Archbishop quoted some similar thoughts at a recent Deanery meeting. He read an extract from Jack Seymour's book entitled "Teaching the Way of Jesus".

Here is part of what he shared; "We already know what makes a congregation vital – it is changed lives.

It is places where new life is present when brokenness seems the reality, where grace offers new chances, where healing occurs, where communities are reborn and reshaped.

Church growth is not the issue; rather, growth in faith is. The task is not competition for market share; it is renewal by the spirit.

It is transformation. It is birth of communities of redemption."

Instead of allowing anxiety to reign, we are to look to Jesus who is in this boat with us. We have a tendency to look to the past and to fear the future.

We are to look to the present. Wait on the Holy Spirit. Look for signs and wonders in your fellow parishioners.

Have faith in your leadership team. Uphold one another in prayer. Believe that Jesus has faith you.

Like David stick to what you know. Reflect on the times God has seen you through difficult times in the past and pray earnestly.

In this morning's gospel we have the account of the disciples taking Jesus to the other side of the sea. They encounter a storm and cried out to Jesus.

You are on a journey like the disciples. Whilst such journeys can be unsettling, remember that Jesus is in the boat with us.

Have confidence in your leadership team mindful that Jesus had confidence in the disciples. Above all pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit for yourselves and this faith community.

Owen Strong

Locum Priest.