

**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday before Lent, Year C**

**Genesis 2.4b-9,15-25 • Psalm 65 • Revelation 4 • Luke 8.22-25**

**Christ Church, Chelsea**

**20 February 2022**

**Sam Hole**

*'Master, Master, we are perishing!'*

*May I speak, and may we hear, in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

The scene was enough to make the Sea of Galilee seem like a boating lake on a still day. Ernest Shackleton and five of his crew were sat in a small lifeboat, just off the coast of Antarctica. They were trying to travel the 800 miles to South Georgia, to find rescue for themselves and the rest of their crew left behind on Elephant Island.

For 16 days, they battled monstrous swells and angry winds, bailing water out of the boat and beating ice off the sails. Shackleton later recalled the experience, after the successful rescue of all the crew. "The boat tossed interminably on the big waves under grey, threatening skies," he wrote. "Every surge of the sea was an enemy to be watched and circumvented." Even as they were within touching distance of their goal, the elements hurled their worst at them: "The wind simply shrieked as it tore the tops off the waves. Down into valleys, up to tossing heights, straining until her seams opened, swung our little boat."<sup>1</sup>

Even today, as modern-day adventurers search for the wreck of Shackleton's *Endurance*, the Antarctic is a supremely hostile environment. I dread to think what those men felt as they faced those ferocious seas – and the similar terrifying scenes countless sailors faced on Friday in the face of Storm Eunice. It brings me closer to the scene we have laid before us in today's gospel reading, and the dread that the disciples must have felt as their boat began to sink lower and lower in the stormy water.

Try to think of an event in the face of which we feel powerless, and we might well name something like a ship tossed around in the storm. But there is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/shackleton-endurance-survival>. The quotations are from Ernest Shackleton, *South*, (1919) chapter 9.

another kind of situation – again, particularly in our news this week – that can equally make us feel helpless.

I can't claim to know many Ukrainians. But I remember a visit from one to an old housemate of mine about ten years ago. One night our visitor made for us a magnificent borscht – bright purpley-red and filled with flavour. (The reason for the great taste became apparent when I looked in the fridge later and saw the remaining half tub of lard that had *not* gone into the soup.) This week I have thought multiple times of Fyodor, wondering where he is and what he is feeling at the moment. For what is happening at the moment in Eastern Europe may seem – to quote Neville Chamberlain – like a 'quarrel in a far away country, between people of whom we know nothing'. But those people are 40 million Ukrainians, young and old, each with their own hopes and fears. And, in the face of Russian aggression, a sense of helplessness abounds. I feel helpless, doubtless our politicians feel rather helpless – but what we in the West may feel is surely as nothing compared to the helplessness felt by millions of Ukrainians today.

Both moments – the storm on the sea, and the waiting for impending invasion – are moment when we might feel a sense of helplessness in the face of great forces. In both cases we face waves crashing onto us with power far greater than we can resist. In both cases we know that such turmoil arises from deep currents, far more complex than we can comprehend.

Where is that feeling of helplessness washing over you today? When are the moments you feel you are sinking beneath the waves? In the face of an overwhelming workload; or difficult family life; or weighed down by our emotional burdens. And when do you feel powerless in the face of great forces – be they literal forces as faced by the people of Ukraine, or the forces of the systems of modern life that can grind us down and push us back?

The writers of the biblical texts knew, of course, both kinds of helplessness. They knew the helplessness we might feel in the face of the created order. And they knew of what it feels like to face overwhelming human force.

It is over the face of the waters that the Spirit hovered at the beginning of creation (Gen 1). The sea is the dwelling place of the Leviathan, that mysterious sea monster (e.g. Ps 104.26). The disciples may have averted disaster in today's gospel, but at the end of the Book of Acts we have the terrifying account of the shipwreck of the apostle Paul on the island of Malta (Acts 27.1-28.16). In the Bible, the sea stands for that great chaotic, uncontrollable, aspect of creation.

And the scriptural writers know too of what it is to wait for the armies of distant empires to come crashing upon you. The Old Testament is a chronicle of the ancient Israelites facing the might first of the Assyrians, and then of the Babylonians, then the Persians, and then the Greeks. We might think of Jesus and his first followers living under Roman oppression, and quaking at the Roman destruction of the Temple in AD 70. When Paul speaks of the 'principalities' and 'powers' in this world (Eph 6.12; cf Col 1.16), he surely has in view these distant but mighty empires, imposing their rule on millions who are powerless to resist.

The helplessness of the shipwreck and the helplessness in the face of imperial power. The origins of the helplessness, in the great evils that afflict the human race, may be different. But in both cases, the helplessness may feel very similar. We may cry out with the disciples: 'Master, Master, we are perishing!' We may ask: 'Where is God? Is he asleep at the wheel?' How, as we ponder the biblical witness, may we try to make sense of these terrors?

Three brief thoughts with which I want to finish. First: the biblical writers are ready to acknowledge and sit with their helplessness. That is part of the point of prayer: to be able to hold all we are feeling before God; to say 'this is what is happening for me right now, and it hurts'.

Second: the biblical writers also seek to do what they can in the face of dangers. In the face of evil, we pray, asking God to work for the good of those who love him. Against the dangers of the weather, the grace of scientific discovery has enabled us to build better ships; to forecast the weather; to develop safer ways of working. Christians aren't called to ignore evil and suffering. We are right to confront them; to fight them, where necessary. God gives us the tools to do so.

And, third: the helplessness in the face of creation, and the helplessness in the face of human evil – there will come a time when both will cease. In today's gospel, Christ calms the storm. The message is clear: chaos exists in the world, but it is chaos over which the creator has control. The New Testament writers celebrate the resurrection as a cosmic moment in which the powers of darkness are finally conquered, even if skirmishes continue. And when the new heaven and the new earth are created in the Book of Revelation, we are told that there is 'no more sea' (Rev 21.1): the powers of chaos are ended. In similar fashion, the Book of Revelation tells of the final battles when human evil is wiped out. Christ the judge appears. The world is put to rights, and those who have abused their God-given power are given their just deserts. We will, one day, know peace.

For now, however, we and many around the world may continue to feel a sense of helplessness in areas of our lives. There will be those of us here today who feel that we are sinking beneath the waves; around the world people, like those of Ukraine, waiting for aggression they are powerless to resist. That helplessness is indeed, following the biblical writers, something which we do well to bring before God in prayer; to sit with; to work to counter; all the while looking clear-sightedly at the evils of chaos and aggression that are part of our world.

But it is, ultimately, Christian hope that peace will come. Justice will overflow. Whatever the moment, we may cry out to God. And we trust that we will know, in the words of today's Psalm, the protection of the 'God of our salvation, ... who stilleth the raging of the sea, and the noise of his waves, and the madness of the people'. (Ps 65.5-7)