

Teaching 1: “Do not fret . . . ”

The words ‘Be Still’ occur seven times, in the NIV at least. We’ve seen two of them already, in our liturgy. In Zechariah 2, when we’re told to be still and worship God, and in Mark 4, when we’re reminded who it is that we are worshipping: the Lord of all Creation.

There are acts of human creativity that can reduce us to tears or strike us dumb with admiration: feats of engineering, scientific discoveries, pieces of music, art or sculpture, passages of literature . . . We wonder at the minds and hands that lie behind these creations.

We all respond to different aspects of human creativity. Think for a moment of a book or poem, a play or film, a piece of music or art or sculpture or engineering that really speaks to you . . .

The God we worship is the One who created the humans who are able to do those things. He created the matter from which we are made; the space in which we exist; the very time through which we move. He created the finely balanced forces of nature that underpin our existence; the mysterious components of atomic nuclei; the unimaginable swirl of galaxies.

When we are told to be still before the Lord, *this* is the God whose presence we are in.

But even if we believe in God’s power, when we find ourselves in a storm it’s all too tempting to lose faith in his care for us. To shout, with the disciples, ‘Don’t you care if I drown?’ How could God let this happen to me?

Or to have the opposite reaction: this is just how the world is; plenty of people are worse off than me; this isn’t a big enough problem in the grand scheme of things to be of concern to God; and anyway who am I to be worthy of his attention, intervention, miracles?

Sometimes, indeed, we are rightly aware that the situation is of our own making.

Nehemiah 8.8-11

When the people heard and understood God’s law, they began to weep. They really got it: their choices had distanced them not only from one another but also from God himself. But Nehemiah told them not to be sad, for the joy of the Lord was their strength. When we truly turn back to him, God’s joy - pictured so vividly in the parable of the prodigal son - is such that it blots out what has gone before. In Christ we are truly reconciled to God as his precious children. Are we ready to accept the gift of his forgiveness - to stop condemning ourselves and be still before him?

But sometimes the storm is truly not of our own making, but of someone else’s. Other people may betray us, oppose us, disappoint us, lie about us, abandon us, deliberately hurt us or those we love . . . And we may see them prospering while we are ravaged by the storm.

Psalms 37.1-9

God invites us to be still in the face of other people’s wrong-doing. Our fretting leads only to evil, whereas if we commit our ways to the Lord and trust in him, then he will give us the desires of our heart.

Is that always a good thing?! If we truly trust in God, then he will send his Holy Spirit to transform the desires of our heart.

Judgement and justice are matters for God, not for us. We mustn’t let others’ actions make us lose sight of his justice, his mercy and his love. Do we believe that he loves us and wants to give us the desires of our heart?

Are we ready to be still before him, focusing on our own relationship with him and not fretting about other people's faults and wrong-doing?

As we move into our first Quiet time, you may wish to focus on God's call for us to be still in the face of our own wrongdoing and other people's: to seek forgiveness; to forgive; to keep our eyes on him.

Teaching 2: "Know that I am God."

We have seen that God invites us to be still, in the face of our own sin and other people's, and turn to him. God invites us to be still, also, when the storms rage around us.

Psalm 46.1-3, 9-11

God invites us to be still in storms that may be of ill-health: our own or our loved ones'. They may be storms on an international scale: natural disasters, the global financial crisis, terrorism or war. They may be storms of bereavement or broken relationships. They may be storms of mental ill-health or crises of faith. They may be the storms that our children experience as they make disastrous choices or face life's rough seas.

We have seen that God can say to the storm, 'Be still', but sometimes the storm seems to go on and on unabated, and his words are addressed not to it but to *us*. 'Be still and know that I am God'.

Nowhere in the Bible does it promise us that if we are Christians then we will escape life's storms. We live in a fallen world where horrific things happen and people treat one another terribly. But *everywhere* in the Bible, running through it like the message in a stick of rock, we are promised that the Lord Almighty is with us: he is an ever-present help in trouble, our refuge and our strength.

We can choose to ignore the fortress he offers us: to fight and protest against the storm's blast, or to try to build our own shelter by our own strength. But the Lord of all creation offers us *his* strength, he invites us into the shelter that *he* provides, and he promises us that if we accept *him* as our God then he will be exalted. In other words, he will act so powerfully that all the earth will praise him. In Christ he has overcome, and through his Holy Spirit in us, so can we.

We need to be still: to trust God with other people's needs, and to concentrate on keeping ourselves close to him through prayer, Bible reading and fellowship. Like Job, we need to remember how great God is, and not allow the storms to turn us away from him.

Sometimes it's not an actual storm that defeats us, but an apparent threat of disaster.

Exodus 14.10-14

Let's look in a little more detail at the Israelites' response as Pharaoh approached from behind and the Red Sea loomed in front. They gave in to *terror*; they heaped all the *blame* on Moses; and they lost sight of the *truth*.

Moses' answer addressed all three elements: *do not* be afraid; stand firm and God will deliver you - in other words, *your* choice is what matters, and what happens next is between you and God; the looming disaster is only apparent - the *reality* is that these Egyptians are about to be defeated - and you have lost sight of the truth that God is in control here.

When apparent disaster looms in our lives - whether in the realm of health, finances, relationships, career or whatever - can we see things as God sees them and reject the worldly view? Can we reject fear and keep our eyes on God? Can we stand firm on what he has shown and taught us in the past? Can we focus on our own relationship with God rather than lashing out at others? Can we be still and trust him to fight for us?

Sometimes, of course, when God does just that, we're still not satisfied!

Jeremiah 47.6-7

One of the riskiest prayers we can pray is for God to reveal what's taking root that's not from him, that it may be uprooted and die. Or we may pray for a loved one to come to faith. And we all know the old joke about the risks of praying for patience! Sometimes the storm is what swirls around God as he acts in power - perhaps in answer to our prayers. Look at the events of Good Friday: how must it have felt to be one of his disciples at that time? The spiritual battle can be frightening and sometimes we want to say to God, 'Be still!'

BUT we can always trust God. The victory *is* Christ's. The God of all creation is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

As we move into our Quiet time, you may wish to focus on God's call for us to be still in the face of all manner of storms, in the face of an unknown future, and in the face of his coming in power - to keep our eyes on him.