

SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD

Is 8:23-9:3 (9:1-4); Ps 27(26) 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17; Matthew 4:12-23

Jesus said: Follow me!

Matt. 4:12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 15 “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—16 the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Matt. 4:18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 19 And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

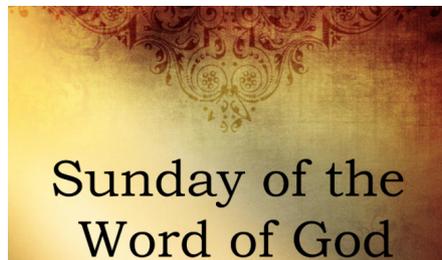
Matt. 4:23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

There are three scenes here: (1) the timing and location of Jesus’ proclamation; (2) the call of the first disciples; (3) a general description of the ministry.

KIND OF WRITING

(1) The first scene is a kind of epitome, a synthesis of Jesus preaching, amplified by a quotation from the Bible. Historically, Zebulun and Naphtali are two of the twelve tribes whose restoration is



symbolised by the twelve apostles. (2) The call stories are technically short scenes (*chreiai*), which put their finger on the essential. It is noticeable that all dimensions of human interest (e.g., did they know him before hand? how did they feel?) are omitted and we are left with two theological aspects: the sovereign call of Jesus and the response of the disciples, apparently totally without reservation. (3) The summary statement gives a general sense of reaction to Jesus, to be filled out in the unfolding narrative proper.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) The quotation refers to a passage in Isaiah, used as the first reading. If, as is often the case, we are meant to “hear” the context of the citation, then it becomes even more interesting:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Is 9:6-7)

(ii) The expression “Kingdom of God” does not occur in the Hebrew Old Testament (it does once in the Greek Book of Wisdom). However, God is very regularly called King and so the rule of God is already part of the faith of the people. In particular, God’s kingdom, as contrasted with earthly kingdoms, is a central topic in the Book of Daniel. This

Thought for the day

The heart of Jesus’ proclamation is given in today’s Gospel. As is often noted, the word “repent” is not the best translation of the original Greek and it would be better to use some other expression such as “convert.” It really means a new way of looking at everything, a new mind or outlook. It may of course include being sorry about the past, but the real energy is towards the future: “convert and put your trust in the Good News.” We could put it like this: from what are we called to conversion is important; more important is towards what are we being called?

Prayer

Open our hearts, loving Father, that we may know both healing and hope. Touch our inmost selves and bring us the wholeness we need. Plant in our hearts the vision of your reign that we be people of hope, faith and love.

book was written in a time of persecution and looked forward to an end-time intervention of God which would establish his rule comprehensively:

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever. (Dan. 2:44)

This is the background to Jesus’ proclamation: he belongs to the Baptist’s movement, awaiting a special intervention by God. In many ways, it is the question of “where is God” in the midst of injustice and innocent suffering, a perennial human question. Daniel, John the Baptist and Jesus shared a view that God would show himself a God of justice and act.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(1) The expression “kingdom of God/heaven” remains the central symbol of Jesus’ proclamation throughout this gospel: Matt 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19-20;

6:33; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 11:11-12; 12:28; 13:11, 24, 31, 33, 44-45, 47, 52; 16:19; 18:1, 3-4, 23; 19:12, 14, 23-24; 20:1; 21:31, 43; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1. It reaches its paradoxical climax at the cross: Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." (Matt 27:37). (2) The image of light comes back in the Sermon on the Mount: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matt 5:14-16). (3) The disciples called eventually become the (highly symbolic) Twelve, symbolising the restoration of Israel (Matt 9:20; 10:1-2, 5; 11:1; 19:28; 20:17; 26:14, 20, 47, 53). Two texts illustrate the significance: "These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt 10:5-6); "Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (Matt 19:28)

ST PAUL

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (Rom 10:14-17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 John's removal triggers the ministry of Jesus; Jesus moves from Judea or at least from the Jordan valley back to Galilee.

Verse 13 The tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali occupied the later Galilee. Thus Matthew is faithful to Jesus' focus on the people of Israel. The writing seems to imply an initial return to Nazareth and then a decision to make Capernaum the centre of the ministry. A "house of Peter" in Capernaum may

well go back to the first century. The sea refers to the sea of Galilee (Luke is more accurate in calling it a lake).

Verse 14 Matthew often offers "God's perspective" by means of a citation. "This happened to fulfil" is especially evident in Matthew 1-2.

Verse 15-16 The citation is from Is 9:1. Gentiles (lit. nations) take us to the wider mission of the later church. Cf. *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.* (Matt 28:19-20)

Verse 17 "To proclaim" gives us the significant early Christian word "kerygma" meaning effective proclamation. *Metanoia* is better translated as "convert" rather than the more narrow "repent". It implies a new vision, which includes repentance but is not limited to looking back to the past.

Verse 18 The call of the first disciples is recounted. Matthew keeps Mark's rather redundant explanation "for they were fisherman." It does lead to the metaphorical use of "fishing for people."

Verses 19 "Follow me" is a unique expression associated only with Jesus. Jesus selects his followers; in contrast, disciples presented themselves to the rabbi for instruction. There is no story in the Synoptic Gospels of someone taking the initiative and *successfully* becoming a disciple.

Verse 20 Their business suggests the metaphor for the mission. The immediacy of their response is striking.

Verses 21-22 The hint of human interest here is not taken up, because the call stories profile the sovereign authority of Jesus, with no interest in biography or even psychology.

Verse 23 This summary anticipates Matt 8:17 and echoes Isa 53:4, part of one of the Suffering Servant songs. The little slip "their synagogues" makes it clear that the perspective of this very Jewish Gospel is after the break with Judaism.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus moved to Capernaum to establish a home there, a home that would be secure and give him a base for his future

ministry. Where have you found a secure base for your life and work?

2. "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light" ... Jesus applies this to himself and his message. Who have been the Jesus people who have been a source of light to you? Have you been such a light for others?

3. "From that time Jesus began to proclaim...." This marks a turning point in the life of Jesus. From now on his mission was clear to him and he spoke out. Can you recall turning points in your life after which the future became more clear?

4. His message was a call to repentance, to a change of attitude toward God, from seeing God as one to be feared to seeing God as a God of love. When have you heard that call in your life? What was it like for you?

5. Jesus invited disciples to join him in his mission. What have been the occasions in your life when you have had an invitation to join someone in a great project? What was that like for you? Have you given that invitation to others?

6. In responding, the disciples "left their nets" to follow Jesus. Sometimes we have to disentangle ourselves from other things to give ourselves freely and wholeheartedly to a commitment. Have you experienced being "enmeshed" and being free?

7. In v. 23 we have a summary of the ministry of Jesus – "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom" and witnessing to this by teaching and healing. Who has been such a witness to you? What have been the signs that accompanied their witness? When have you done this yourself?

PRAYER

God of salvation, the splendour of your glory dispels the darkness of earth, for in Christ we behold the nearness of your kingdom.

Now make us quick to follow where he beckons, eager to embrace the tasks of the gospel.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel

1 Cor 1:10 I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree together, to end your divisions, and to be united by the same mind and purpose. 11 For members of Chloe's household have made it clear to me, my brothers and sisters, that there are quarrels among you. 12 Now I mean this, that each of you is saying, "I am with Paul," or "I am with Apollos," or "I am with Cephas," or "I am with Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Paul wasn't crucified for you, was he? Or were you in fact baptised in the name of Paul? 14 *I thank God that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius,* 15 *so that no one can say that you were baptised in my name!* 16 *(I also baptised the household of Stephanus. Otherwise, I do not remember whether I baptised anyone else.)* 17 For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel—and not with clever speech, so that the cross of Christ would not become useless.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The lectionary excerpt jumps forward to v. 10 — but it is worth reading the thanksgiving as such (see below). The key word "fellowship" is in v. 9. We are familiar with the contemporary divisions among Christians; that such splits started so early can be both alarming and reassuring. Paul, of course, thinks such division fall far short of God's purpose in Christ, to bring all things together. Cf. *God is faithful, by whom you were called into fellowship with his son, Jesus Christ our Lord.* (1 Cor 1:9) Such an appeal must resonant again in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

KIND OF WRITING

The body of the letter starts here. The first part of 1 Corinthians is devoted Paul's response to things he has heard about the communities in Corinth (1:10-6:20). The first large block—1:10-4:21—is a large coherent argument, with each element building on the previous and leader inexorably to the next.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The size of the community at this point may have been very small indeed. If they ever all came together to worship, it may have been in a typical Roman villa. On average, such villas could accommodate about fifty people. Clearly, however,

the house churches at loggerheads, perhaps because of attachment to different great names. As a good pastor, Paul starts with the actual situation in Corinth, where tremendous fissures have opened up between the house churches.

RELATED PASSAGES

Thanksgiving

I always thank my God for you because of the grace of God that was given to you in Christ Jesus. For you were made rich in every way in him, in all your speech and in every kind of knowledge—just as the testimony about Christ has been confirmed among you—so that you do not lack any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into fellowship with his son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor 1:4-9)

What is Apollos, really? Or what is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, and each of us in the ministry the Lord gave us. I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused it to grow. (1 Cor 3:5-6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 10 This is a very direct appeal, made with authority (in the name of our Lord), naming the problem (divisions) and the goal (the mind and purpose). It is not confined either to one community or the past! Cf. *Complete my joy and be of the same mind, by having the same love, being united in spirit, and having one purpose.* (Phil 2:2)

Verse 11 Who was Chloe? It is not so clear. She may have been a businesswoman, with interests in Corinth and Ephesus (the place of writing). Her property in Corinth seems to have been a place of meeting, even if it is not quite certain that she herself was a Christ believer. In any case, her household is evidently unhappy with the divisions, unlike the other groupings, apparently more complacent about the lack of harmony. In particular, Paul has picked up that such divisions lead to a feeling superiority, to a devaluing of the cross and, among some, to gross immorality.

Verse 12 As often in the Corinthian correspondence, Paul illustrates the case by using slogans of groups. It can still surprise that one group tried to distinguish itself by claiming to be "of Christ." Apollos was a silver-tongued Hellenistic Jew from Alexandria, who preaching was much, much better than Paul's. See Acts 18:24, 27; 19:1; 1 Cor 1:12; 3:4-6, 22; 4:6; 16:12; Titus 3:13. Cephas is the Aramaic version of Peter.

Verse 13 For Paul, unity is Christ is essential and any division reprehensible. Paul uses irony, not to say sarcasm, in a powerful rhetorical question: *Paul wasn't crucified for you, was he?*

Verses 14-16 The lectionary omits these verses, although they are very interesting. They shed a light on Paul's practice. (1) Paul does not rush into baptism and (2) Paul sometimes moves on, even though the mission might seem incomplete. Thus, although he spent perhaps upwards of two years in Corinth, he evidently baptised only a few people, whom he mentions by name. (This is not to say that others did not baptise, of course.) The risk of such a pastoral approach is that later others will come along and complete the work in a way which contradicts Paul's teaching. This certainly happened in Galatia and seems to have happened here too. Apollos, for example, is more esteemed by some Corinthian disciples because he is a better speaker (rhetoric enjoyed a high cultural value). See 1 Cor 3:5-6.

Verse 17 Paul's ministry is defined as *kerygmatic* rather than sacramental. A further distinction is made: not with clever speech, lit. *ouk en sophia logou*, not with a word of wisdom. Paul avoids clever speech, so as not to *empty* the cross—a powerful play on words. Cf. *But Christ emptied himself* (Phil 2:7)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Does the divided reality of present-day Christianity disturb me sufficiently? What can *I* do about it?
2. Clever speech can be attractive, even seductive. Yet, at the heart of the Gospel stands the paradox of the cross, not evidently a "word of wisdom" but rather of foolishness.

PRAYER

Father of us all, you send your Son to bring all humanity together, one in faith and love. Disturb our comfort with accepted divisions and by your Spirit make us, your church, one in mind and heart.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light

Is. 9:1 (☞) In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

3 You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

4 (☞) For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 (☞) *For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

6 (☞) *For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading is very accurately chosen, given that Matthew actually cites it. As often in the New Testament, the context of the citation is also implied. The whole reading functions as a kind of curtain raiser for the career and ministry of Jesus in this Gospel. (There is a discrepancy in verse numbering; here we follow the NRSV.)

KIND OF WRITING

This is very carefully written poetry, offering a variant on the usual parallelism in vv. 3 and 4. The full section goes on to vv. 5 and 6, providing us with words familiar from the Advent and Christmas lectionaries. A Hebrew marker “for” (☞) guides the reader through the contrasts. One dictionary gives this definition: a marker that shows the relationship between clauses, sentences, or sections; logical: for, that, because; contrast: but, except; introducing a statement, often untranslated. It is included in the text above in Hebrew (yk!). Perhaps something like nevertheless would capture the tone.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The reading is from First Isaiah, that is, chs. 1-39, representing the work of the 8th century bc prophet Isaiah. The As-

syrian threat was very apparent, during a brief economic boom period. The often mentioned Tiglath-pileser III was the outstanding Assyrian commander.

RELATED PASSAGE

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. (Is 11:10; cf. Is 2:4; Is 60:1-3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The context is the unrelieved gloom of the previous verses: *Surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn! They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness.* (Is 8:20-22) The sharp contrast teaches that the doom-sayers will not have the final word; instead, there is hope.

Zebulun and Naphtali had been diminishing in significance, especially under the pressure of the marvellously named Tiglath-pileser III. He may be the person intended by the “latter time.” The three expressions at the end seem to refer to the Assyrian administrative dis-

tricts of Dor, Megiddo and Gilead.

Verse 2 This is a kind of chorus, commenting on what has just been said. Deep darkness translates a very evocative Hebrew expression meaning the shadow of death or deadly darkness, as we would say.

Verse 3 Who is speaking here? Who is being addressed? Perhaps a hearer of v.2 is speaking and perhaps addressing not necessarily God but the previous speaker? Notice the parallelism shifted to the subordinate clauses. The imagery of harvest and plunder suggests gain after a struggle, whether agricultural or military. In any case, great joy is the message.

Verse 4 What was the “day of Midian”? In Judges 7:17-25, there is a victory against impossible odds, rendered even more improbable by Lord’s instruction to reduce the number of soldiers involved: The Lord said to Gideon, “The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, ‘My own hand has delivered me.’ (Judg 7:2) Otherwise, the images are of great liberation and freedom.

Verse 5 These seemingly strange instructions reflect the teaching on holy war, when all the booty, including uniforms, is to be burned.

Verse 6 Yet, another voice interprets the prophecy in Davidic mode.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It is often said that the darkest part of the night is just before the dawn. When have you experienced a turn around from dark to light, from despair to hope?
2. The feeling from release from oppression can describe a whole range of experiences—from stress, bereavement, addiction, breakdown and so forth. How have you come through such experiences? Time to praise God who sets us free.
3. Overcoming seemingly impossible odds is also in the reading. Have you known that in your own life and relationships? Time to thank God.

PRAYER

Loving God, you love the human race and you are with us on the whole journey of life. Help us put our trust in you, even when we are tempted to lose heart. In you rests all our hope.

THE LITURGY

Is 8:23-9:3 (9:1-4); Ps 27(26) 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17; Matthew 4:12-23

READINGS 1 AND 3

Given that the Gospel quotes Isaiah, the fit is unavoidable and perfect.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 27 (26) is a perfect match: The Lord is my light and my help; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; before whom shall I shrink?

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Is 8:23-9:3 (9:1-4)

Our Gospel reading quotes part of this passage. It was written at a time of false economic growth and real international pressure. In the face of these, the prophet does offer hope—but as the gift of God alone.

Second reading

1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17

In the light of the week of prayer for Christian unity, this reading should speak to us all. Conflict, even with Christianity, is normal. The question is whether it should lead to division or rather a deeper communion in Christ.

Gospel

Matthew 4:12-23

Although we have been reading Matthew since the start of Advent, today we begin reading the Gospel continuously from the start of Jesus' ministry. The ministry begins with a ringing proclamation of the Kingdom, a proclamation which lays the foundations for all that follows.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 26 January

St Timothy and Titus, bishops

2 Timothy 1:1-8

The tone of encouragement is always needed and today, more than ever, we need the reminder *to fan into a flame* the gift of God.

Mark 4:26-34

A further few seed parables illuminate the Gospel. The parable of the farmer

asleep is especially encouraging: just let things grow. Cf. *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.* (1Corinthians 3:6)

Tuesday 27 January

St Angela Merici, virgin

2 Samuel 6:12-15, 17-19

The ark represented the presence of God *on the move with the people*. The settling down, so to speak, of God's presence in Jerusalem, even without a temple, was indeed a momentous choice.

Mark 3:31-35

Our reading can feel a little unsettling because it sounds like Jesus is dismissing his family, including his mother. However, it is really an affirmation of the essence of discipleship.

Wednesday 28 January

St Thomas Aquinas, religious and doctor

2 Samuel 7:4-17

Today we read from one of a few absolutely central texts from the Old Testament. Earlier in the chapter, David made a proposal to build God a house. Through Nathan, God refuses David for the substantial reasons given. Nevertheless, a tremendous promise is made to David and his "house", a mark of God's love and faithfulness through time.

Mark 4:1-20

This long reading can be tricky. The original parable is given first, a parable *from the lips of Jesus*. The later explanation of the parable comes *from church tradition*, a kind of allegorical reading. The allegory narrows the original meaning of the parable. In between, the question of the disciples is difficult. It seems to be answering a later issue: how was that that most of Jesus' fellow Jews did not recognise him as the Messiah?

Thursday 29 January

2 Samuel 7:18-19, 24-29

The full context of this reading is interesting. David proposed building a temple, a house for God. Speaking through Nathan the prophet, God said, no, but that God would build him a house, a dynasty. The bit we get to hear today is the pious part!! Christians see in Jesus, the Son of David, the fulfilment of

God's promise to be faithful to the house of David.

Mark 4:21-25

It may help to recall that in those days a lamp was a naked flame. Putting it under a bed would not be advisable at all! The enigmatic second saying is presented as a shocking contrast. It should read, "from the one who *thinks he has* (but really does not), even what *he thinks he has* will be taken away. It is a stern wake-up call.

Friday 30 January

St Aidan, bishop

2 Samuel 11:1-4, 5-10, 13-17

This is a horrible and fascinating story. The opening lines set up the tension. It begins with, at the turn of the year when kings to campaigning and we expect to hear, "David went to war", but on the contrary the wretch was at home committing adultery. To cover his tracks, David acted really, really badly, as we hear.

Mark 4:26-34

A further few seed parables illuminate the Gospel. The parable of the farmer asleep is especially encouraging: just let things grow. Cf. *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.* (1Corinthians 3:6)

Saturday 31 January

St John Bosco, priest and religious

2 Samuel 12:1-7, 10-17

Because of David's adultery with the wife of Uriah and his subsequent murder, the prophet Nathan is sent by God to accuse David of his sins. The prophet begins by tricking the king into righteous anger and then very cleverly catching him out. The electric words are "You are the man." David wasn't the first or last person in the world to have been a hypocrite or to have acted inconsistently.

Mark 4:35-41

Already at the hands of Mark, the calming of the storm is to be read symbolically. The later church, under tremendous pressure during the Jewish War, questions the presence and even the concern of Jesus. The final question is one we need to ask again and again.