

“And when he was entered into a ship, his disciples followed him. And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves: but he was asleep. And his disciples came and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish. And he saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea: and there was a great calm. But the men marvelled, saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?”—Matt. 8:23-27

CALM AFTER STORM
A Sermon By Theodor Zahn

JESUS, with His disciples, in a little ship apparently at the mercy of the tempestuous waves on the lake, but saved from all danger and anxiety by His mighty word: this is the short summary of the narrative. And what is its teaching for us? From time immemorial it has been looked upon as a prophetic picture of the Church of Christ in the course of this world. Though the right limits may often have been exceeded by the play of imagination, the idea is right and true; it is the very kernel of the story. For what took place then on the Lake of Gennesaret is really the experience of the Church, the community of Jesus. The little band of men who were able to manage the ship formed the Church in those days; and it would have been well if the Church, at all times, had remembered her beginning, and had taken to heart the teaching of this story. It is good for us all to remember it now, and to acknowledge that it is our condition which is represented there, that it is our deliverance which is related there, if God is gracious to us. Let us imagine for a moment that what the disciples feared had come true; that the angry waves had swallowed up the ship, and buried it for ever. Where should we have been now? Certainly, we should never have been Christians. The Churches would never have been built, where the devout, in the long wide naves, can always gather together, and seek rest for their souls in the unrest of this life, consolation in need and trouble, and strength for the fight with the temptations of life. Or, do you imagine that men would ever have preached, all over the world, of a Jesus of Nazareth, who, in the sleep of death, had sunk down to the depths of the sea, as they preach now, and as they always will, of the crucified and risen Saviour? If any man had dared to preach of a man who had been drowned as the Saviour of the world, would he have found faith in the world? No, we, with all that we have and are at its best, were saved on that day, and we can never be saved in any other way. As long as Christians exist on earth who confess Jesus as their Saviour, as long as there are men who feel their need of a Saviour, they will recognise their own position in the story of our Gospel, and see the Deliverer here who alone can help.

But let us also be honest, my beloved, let us openly acknowledge that our natural thoughts, wishes, and aspirations suggest very different ideas when we think either of the whole Church or of our own lives. Did not our Lord Himself speak of His Church as a house which He would establish firmly on a rock? And is now an unsteady fishing-boat to be the sole picture of His community? If it were only a stately ship sailing with all sails set over the waves of the sea of the world, instead of a miserable little boat that could be upset by a wave on the little lake! And, as individuals, are we not always considering how we can provide a fixed abode and a safe position for ourselves in this world? Is our condition here to be always like that of the disciples when they tossed to and fro? That is not our idea at all. Neither did it suit the ideas of those who then revered Jesus; but the Lord has not left us in doubt as to the mind which must be in all who wish to have Him as their Saviour. The same evening, a Scribe came to Him after He had already told His disciples to get the ship ready for the voyage, and said to Him: “Master, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest.” But Jesus answered him: “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head.” And another man, who was His disciple already, begged that he need not accompany Him this time, but that he might instead be allowed to go and bury his father, who had just died. And Jesus said to him: “Let the dead bury their dead.” It cannot be concealed from any one who wishes to be the

disciple of Jesus, that he must give up every claim to earthly safety and comfort; and every one who looks upon himself as the disciple of Jesus must be ready also to prove by deed, when required, that fellowship with the Lord is more to him than any other fellowship. We are not told what became of these two men afterwards, but I know this, and all may learn it by experience, that no man can be as safely protected for time and eternity in a strong fortress in this world, as in the little tossing ship in which Jesus Christ is with us.

If we now follow His call in spirit and accompany Him and His disciples on the voyage, may the merciful and faithful God give His strength and His blessing to us weak ones, that the eternal truth of this story may be transformed into deed and truth in our lives.

The picture, which bears the title *Jesus with His own in the storm*, transforms itself before our eyes into three pictures which appear one after the other. We see in quick succession--

First: *Jesus sleeping and the disciples seized by the terror of death.*

Secondly: *Jesus awaking and rebuking the disciples for their little faith.*

Thirdly: *Jesus rebuking the stormy sea; then there is a great calm.*

I.

Jesus had ended a day of fatiguing labour. Mark tells us that, on that day, the thronging of those who sought help, and of those who wished to hear, had been so great that He had no leisure so much as to eat. They followed Him even into His house at Capernaum, and He was obliged to help them till late in the evening, healing the sick, disputing with His adversaries, and teaching the people. His own people thought that He had gone out of His mind. But He is always Himself. He needed rest, and on the land He had indeed no place where He could lay His head. So He said to His disciples, "Let us pass over to the other side." He finds the rest that He needed at last in the ship. He sleeps, and rests from His labours. He does not see the disturbance on the face of the waters; He does not hear the wind suddenly beginning to roar, nor the howling of the storm; He does not see the waves dashing into the ship. He sleeps soundly, and rests securely. We read only once in the Gospels that Jesus slept; and although we do not doubt that it happened many thousands of times, yet we should be as sorry to miss in the Holy Scriptures the sacred picture of Jesus sleeping, as we should be to miss those of His hungering, thirsting, and weeping. We see the Son of Man, who had been working with mind and body till He was exhausted, unable to find anywhere a place where He could lay His weary head; and yet He could find it everywhere, for wherever He was, in a house on dry land, or in a ship on the treacherous element of water, everywhere He could lay His head on the bosom and in the arms of His Heavenly Father. Men, otherwise minded, must wake Him, speak to Him, tell him He is in the greatest danger: He sees and yet does not understand all at once. Blessed is the man who can thus rest, and thus awake, and who, whether sleeping or waking, can trust thus in his God.

Why could not His disciples do so too? There were courageous men among them, and fishermen who knew the lake well, and must certainly have been through many a storm. But habit and natural courage cannot remove the danger, and the danger was great. The ship was filling with water, and every minute it threatened to sink, and there in the stern of the ship, where the steersman generally sits, Jesus was sleeping. They were religious men, aware of something higher than this earthly life; a new world had opened out to them in their fellowship with their Master. They saw a kingdom of God being formed on earth, and they felt that they were citizens of that kingdom, gathered round the heavenly Founder and King of that kingdom. It was only now that life on earth had become of real

value to them; it was delightful to walk now in the land of the living, and it would be awful to sink down into death. If only it might be that one could and would sacrifice himself for all, that all might be saved. But to die for no cause, just when they had begun to live a life full of interest and hope, was indeed bitter and awful. And He on whom all depended, for whom it was worth while to live, and to die, was indeed with them, but He shared their danger. The counsel and kingdom of God, man's salvation and blessedness, seemed in danger of being destroyed. But there was one thing still untried. The Man still lived whose destruction would draw all else after Him. He still lived, but He slept. They awake Him in their terror of death, and cry: "Lord, save us; we perish."

So it is with the community of the Lord in this world, and such also is the experience of every individual Christian. The Church of Christ lives in a world which is not of the same nature as her innermost being. There are times when this unlikeness is not very perceptible. Guided by skilful hands, the little ship glides on securely and unassailed. I do not know that these are the best times. But other times constantly return, when the real nature of the world assaults the Church of Christ with brute force. I do not mean that these are the worst times for the Church. Perhaps they are the times when the Gospel shows its original strength and purity most clearly. But the worst times are those when that comes to pass of which we read in our text: the ship is covered with waves, and then the danger that it will sink is indeed great. I know well, and you all know well too, that the Lord's community is composed at all times of sinful and degraded men, and that it carries about in its own members the evil nature of the world. But it is quite a different matter when this worldliness forces itself violently into the Church, and takes root there. This has happened, and will happen again, at many times and in many ways. In early times it was, and it is still, the love of power, which despises the self-sacrificing service of humble love; or it is the pride of the natural heart, which will not bend to the Gospel of the undeserved grace of God; or it is a natural mode of thought, which refuses the Gospel of faith, because it is foolish preaching, and which will not rest till another gospel is preached in the Church, in which there is nothing to believe, and from which there is nothing more to hope. When such powers force their way into the Church, the best Christians are not those who do not hear the storm, and will not see the waves, and whose souls are not overwhelmed by the water. If we have any love for our Church, we are not ashamed if, now and then, the anxiety which the disciples experienced in those days is ours too. But then we must not complain idly of evil times, and inveigh helplessly against the evil world, or grasp at heathenish ways of conjuring the storms. Then we must do what the disciples did in their agony of death. The Lord is still with those who acknowledge Him, and who, nevertheless, have trouble in the world. Now He no longer slumbers and sleeps. And when it may seem as though He slept, when He does not make Himself known by mighty words and mighty deeds to those who cry to Him for help, it is because they have not yet cried in real earnest: "Lord, save us; or we perish."

II.

The Lord allows Himself to be awakened: He raises His head, He sees the uproar of the elements, and the tumult in the minds of His disciples on their faces pale with terror, and says, as though surprised: "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" They knew well why they were in such great trouble, but they could not frame their lips to say it. They were silenced by the accusation, "O ye of little faith." Little faith is not want [lack] of faith. It is faith burdened by human weakness. It is faith that does not wish to become want of faith. It was faith that caused the disciples to awaken the sleeping Lord: He was their last hope. And yet, in that moment, it became clear to them that the Lord was right. If they had only had faith, in some degree as great and strong, or shall we say, as childlike and simple as that of Jesus, they would have been constrained to say to themselves that the God, without whose will not a sparrow could fall from the roof, would not allow the Saviour and the salvation of the world, and the community which had gathered round this Saviour, to perish miserably. There is also strong

consolation in the Lord's rebuke for those who accept the rebuke, and allow themselves to be guided from all that is uncertain to eternal certainty. There is much that is uncertain in the world, and much that is doubtful even for the disciples of Jesus. But of one thing they may rest assured--in all the storms in the course of this world, the counsel and work of God cannot remain incomplete; the Preserver and the community of those who cleave to Him cannot perish. We will also say it to ourselves when we are over-anxious and afraid about the continuance of true Christianity in our nation and in all the world. We will allow ourselves to be rebuked but also comforted by the truth to be found in our Lord's answer to our cry for help: "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" Why are ye so frightened by the godless powers of this passing world, as though they could destroy that to which your own hearts bear witness as God's eternal work and God's eternal truth?

I do not know that this consolation appeals to all. Perhaps there is some one who says: "I do not fear for the Church and Christendom, but for my own soul; how am I to preserve it in the midst of the strife of opinions? I envy those who can find consolation and strength for life in the old Christian faith, but I cannot answer the arguments by which the wisest prove that it is all superstition, for they have the very strongest allies in my judgment and my own observations." Another says, perhaps: "All may be true which Peter, Paul, and Luther and his colleagues believed and fought for against an incredulous world, and which they made the common faith for many generations of men. But if I am to be honest, I must confess that the real world which I see with my eyes, and in which I am firmly rooted by the many threads of my being, is nearer to my heart than the world of faith of which I neither see nor feel anything. I was not [near]by when that wonderful Man drew men into His enchanted circle, and I, the late-born child of this century, cannot boast of exalted revelations, which might have raised me above this natural world, with all its pleasures and sorrows, its undeniable reality and unquestionable power. And if I were to call upon Him, the Lord of Christendom, He would give me no answer." What can we say to the man who gives way to such stormy thoughts and who doubts his own salvation? I know of only one thing to tell him now: The Lord Jesus Christ answered you before you ever thought or could have thought of crying to Him for help as the Almighty Deliverer and Saviour. He has also said to you: "O thou of little faith, wherefore art thou fearful?" You sit in the ship, and He is there also. You are in the Church which He has gathered round Him, which He has saved and will save. Other Christians have also suffered from the temptations that you endure: O thou of little faith, wherefore art thou so fearful? And the Lord speaks thus also, not only in words that touch our consciences, but also in deeds. Our story is not yet at an end.

III.

"Jesus arose and rebuked the wind and the sea: and there was a great calm." Many storms have risen on that lake since then, and also on other seas, and men have lost heart and have perished. But those who had the Lord Christ with them in the ship, and cried to Him in peril of death, did not perish; they were saved though they seemed at the point of death. The Church, united Christendom, has also experienced many storms in which she has not perished; neither by the enmity of the mighty and the wise, nor even by the favour of the great who protected her, and the unholy thoughts of the masses which forced their way in; neither by the unfaithfulness of her ministers, nor the weakness of her members. She is still here, the community of the faithful, like the little ship which the waves of the ocean have indeed tossed to and fro, but have never been able to overwhelm. This is a miracle before our eyes as good and great as the miracle that took place on that day. And it is one and the same miracle. It is not the skill and the strength of her members and leaders which have preserved the Church hitherto, and have forced back within their boundaries the powers of destruction, but the Lord Christ, who is still ever with her, by His Spirit and His gifts, and who rebukes the little faith of the sailors, and who also, every now and then, speaks a word which becomes a deed, so that all the world asks in astonishment: "Who is this Man that even the winds and the sea obey Him?"

This story has been continued and often repeated in the course of centuries. But one portion of it is still an unfulfilled prophecy. It has never yet become quite calm, and it never will. The storm which makes even the best Christians afraid, rises again and again, and who can tell how often and how long it may seem as though all were lost? It would be but an idle dream were we to allow ourselves to imagine that it could ever be otherwise in the course of this world. But it will not go on so forever without limit or end. Some day the Lord will arise, so that not only His own will hear His voice, but all the world will see Him. Then, when He rebukes the wind and sea, there will be a great calm; and safe in harbour, the community of the saved will praise their Redeemer throughout eternity. Blessed will be he who lives to see it. Do not let us resign ourselves to idle dreams and self-made hopes, but let us hold fast to the hope that Christ has vouched for by word and deed. We are all called; but another end will come first for each one of us. Some day all will be quite calm around us: the calmness of death. We shall lie still, deaf and dumb, and perhaps our dear ones will say of us as we have so often heard it said of others: "How calm and peaceful he looks!" The only question then will be, whether it be the blessed calm which Christ procured and gives to the weary fighter and faithful labourer. The appearance of a dead face gives no answer to this question. It may be that we who are living so peacefully, and who can speak so bravely, may have, on our deathbeds, to withstand a storm of temptation which may seem to question all that we have ever believed during our lives, and that we have confessed before others. But how are we to prepare ourselves? Let us begin at once by taking the dangers seriously which daily threaten our souls; let us learn to cry betimes in every need of our souls: "Lord, help me; or I perish!" Then we shall also be able in the last dread hour, that may be appointed for us, to whisper this prayer, though in a voice failing in death, and our faithful Lord will hear us. He will rebuke the last heavy storm, and, by His word, will bring us into blessed calm and eternal peace. Amen.