‘Let us go across to the other side’

On Monday I took part in an online conference discussing the Church of England report, Living in Love and Faith. Such reports are usually pretty turgid reading, this one is over 400 pages. But Living in Love and Faith is different. It is not really a report, it is an invitation, an invitation for all of us to learn about someone different.

A few years back the bishops issued the Pilling Report on human sexuality. When it was presented to General Synod they didn’t just reject it, they refused to receive it in the first place. It was thrown out lock, stock and barrel. The bishops were told – you have to do better. We have to do better.

Living in love and faith is a process by which we are invited the listen, to hear the stories of people who experience of life, of love, of themselves and others, is different from our own.

You can read the book if you want to, but far more accessible, and interesting, are the series of videos in which people tell their own stories. Humanity is seems, is not always neat and tidy. You can find the details on the CofE website.

God, we are told, created humanity as community, male and female, in the image of God. Just as God created the light and the dark, the day and the night, but also the dawn and the dusk – the twilight times which blend and merge. Things aren’t always so clear cut.

‘Let us go across to the other side’

Mark doesn’t waste words. This is not just about Jesus stilling a storm, though Mark uses this to emphasis who Jesus is and that he has authority, even the wind and sea obey him. ‘The other side’ means more than just crossing the lake. Physically Jesus crossed the lake, from the shore where he was at home amongst friends, to the other side where the people were different. But crossing to the other side had deeper significance. On the other side he would not be welcome or greeted by large crowds. If you read on you’d find that when Jesus reaches the far shore he is met by a madman possessed by demons. Far from stilling a storm Jesus is steering straight into one – going towards people who are different.

Mark tells this story the best. You get it in other gospels as well, but Mark tells it best. Jesus is exhausted, he is drained, he’s been surrounded by people all day and he just needs five minutes peace and quiet. So he gets into a boat and falls asleep.

I don’t know about you but when I’m tired I don’t take too kindly to people waking me up. Especially not when they’re rude. Mark tells us how the disciples woke him – “Do you not care we are perishing?” That’s pretty rude.

Matthew & Luke change it into a more polite plea for help – Master, save us. In Mark – don’t you care?

So I can imagine a grumpy Jesus at this point, he was certainly cross with his friends. He rebukes them and the wind.

Notice that word – rebuke. It is used deliberately. Jesus rebukes the wind. Just as he rebukes his friends for their lack of faith. Just as he will rebuke the demon when he comes to the other side. Just as he rebukes those who cheat the poor, he rebukes those lay heavy burdens upon the weak, he rebukes people who count themselves righteous and look down on others. When Jesus rebukes we need to listen.

He rebuked the wind – this isn’t just about power to control nature. The sudden storm was viewed in the same way as the man with the unclean spirits. In the gospel stories the words used are the same – it is the power of evil that Jesus rebukes. And it respects his authority.

One of my roles in our sailing club is to drive the rescue boat. One blustery evening a group of youngsters were out in single handers, whizzing about in a powerful wind. At times the gusts overwhelmed them and their boats capsized.

 As we worked with each of them one by one, following their boat around the course, sailing all points of the wind, the instructor always said the same thing – when the wind comes, steer into it – when the wind comes, steer into it.

The temptation is steer away from the storm, a good sailor steers into it. The turbulence that can overturn a boat has a similarity to the storms that disrupt our lives. Our instinct is to steer clear, in reality we do better when we steer towards such storms, when we cross towards difficult situations, difficult people.

Mark tells the story of Jesus as it happened. His teaching of God’s kingdom – and his conflict with the powers of this world. And always, Jesus steers into the storm.

Jesus has power and authority, but he does not use them to avoid the hard things, the difficult moments, the difficult people. He seeks out the lost, the different, the rejected, the sick, the mixed-up, the mad, and the bad.

When we encounter life’s storms the same advice holds true – steer into it. Face it with courage, believe God’s power to prevail – even when disaster seems certain.

Living in love and faith is about listening to people who are different from us. It involves us going across to the other side. The place where we are not at home and things are different. It means listening to people whose stories aren’t the same as ours. It means steering into the storm, meeting head on those times when people not like us are rejected, ignored, discounted, and sometimes attacked.

This goes against our instinct, but we need to remember the words of that instructor teaching young people to steer. When the wind comes, steer into it.