

Rock the boat

Genesis 9:8-17; Luke 5:1-11

Rev Jean Shannon

Jesus rocked the boat. No kidding, he almost sank it.

Boats feature a lot in the New Testament what with Jesus rowing out away from the crowds to be alone; snoozing in the boat and only waking to blithely dismiss a raging sea; giving fishing tips to friends and strangers; missing the boat and strolling across the water to climb in; cooking breakfast and waiting for the boats to arrive. For a carpenter, he seemed to have a lot to do with boats. Let us just take a minute to let our imaginations wonder why.

Boats are like cradles. They rock us safely above the chaos. They are a sanctuary in a crazy world.

Light and darkness, hovering above the sea is in our DNA:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ...”¹

And so, I will digress. Has anyone ever explained the logo of the Uniting Church in Australia. If they have, perhaps this is a good time to refresh your memory. Here’s the official version:

“The logo shows the cross of Jesus Christ, in its light and love, standing over a darkened world — redeeming it through grace and truth. By that cross people are bound to Christ and each other. The Holy Spirit, symbolised by the dove with the wings of flame, empowers and guides us to be witnesses to Jesus Christ. The wide U at the bottom points to the fact that we are uniting; as a semicircle it also reminds us that the renewing of both church and world are as yet incomplete.”²

It reminds us: that the gospel message is central in all that we seek to do; of the need for constant reform and renewal; and of our commitment to worship.

But to be honest, before anyone told me all this – I saw a boat, with a cross and a bird floating on a black sea. Black was obvious. It had to be a sea of chaos: a dark world. To me, the boat symbolises:

1. We are suspended – held by the grace of God
2. that we are indeed travelling somewhere, not yet arrived,
3. and the cross is like a sail – the driving force.
4. The Spirit bird, well captain, of course. Someone has to steer the boat; someone with a free imagination; someone not beholden to our grounded muck.

¹ Genesis 1

² Taken from the UCA Assembly website

So in my imagining, while the cross powers the boat, it is the spirit that guides it. To where, I do not know.

The thing about beginning the Lenten journey is that we know where it ends. The thing about travelling on water is there is no clear path. Even Jesus was cagey about who he was and where he was going. So many times, he cures this person or that and what does he say? shush “Don’t tell any one”. After the transfiguration Mark writes:

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what “rising from the dead” meant.”³

In Mark & Luke⁴, Jesus heals a leper and then tells him not to say anything to anyone.

⁴⁰ A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

⁴¹ Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” ⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.

⁴³ Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: ⁴⁴ “See that you don’t tell this to anyone.”⁵

Peter asks ‘who are you?’ and Jesus responds, ‘Who do you say I am?’ Jesus ducks and weaves making cryptic comments but always, always deferring to God. Only John puts words in Jesus mouth, “I am the way, the truth and life”...only John.⁶

Why all the secrecy?

Well, Mark gives us a hint after he cures the Leper – ⁴⁵ Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.⁷

It could have been that dealing with fame is a difficult thing – ask Taylor swift. But then, history also tells us that Jesus lived in dangerous times. You didn’t want the Roman overlords or the Jewish authorities breathing down your neck. Matthew is open about the hostility: after curing the man with the withered hand, it reads: “...but the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.”⁸

³ Mark 9:9

⁴ Mk 1:40-45; Lk 5:12-16

⁶ Mark 8:29

⁷ Mark 1:40-43

⁸ Matthew 12:14

The “Shush – be quiet” happens so many times in the New Testament, it is referred to as the *Messianic Secret* and it has occupied academics for centuries. They’ve been on a quest to solve the mystery.

But this isn’t a mystery like Miss Marple. Mystery in theology is not as simple as finding out who-done-it.

“Testament mysteries are of a different sort.

Indeed, Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall, a pair of theologians, make a helpful distinction between *investigative* mysteries, based on what is unknown, and *revelational* mysteries, which revolve around what is known:

The whole fascination of a detective story lies in trying to solve the puzzle, and when one knows the solution the mystery is dissolved — it is no longer a mystery. . . . But the fascination of many of the New Testament mysteries lies in the peculiar character even after they have been revealed. . . . A revelational mystery excites wonder, awe, amazement, astonishment. . . . This is the way a revelational mystery works: we know, and yet the mystery remains.

They conclude: “Theology is not simply a set of truths to believe; it is a path to walk, or a living vision to pursue.”

That path of secrets and mystery is one of humility and listening. Be quiet. Pay attention. You don’t quite grasp what is really happening here. Following Jesus is a life of knowing and unknowing, of encountering a hidden God and God revealed, and of clouds that sometimes obscure the light.”⁹

It is not a life of just sitting in the boat listening to the wind in the sails. To follow Jesus is to live with mystery, in fact to embrace it. It is to shout out injustices; to break rules when human lives are at stake; to stand up to authority when it is doing wrong AND to lie quietly in the floating cradle and feel the Spirit take you along.

Sometimes, like Jesus, we are called upon to rock the boat.

Amen

⁹ 4 February 2024, Diana Butler Bass from The Cottage <dianabutlerbass@substack.com>