

OUT OF THE BOAT! Jesus and the Contemporary Church

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... *they thought he was a ghost.*

Mark 6:49

Jesus, teaching on the mount they knew. Jesus, feeding the five-thousand, and even raising the dead, they knew!

But what was this new and strange manifestation? The disciples had been directed by Jesus to get into a boat and cross the lake to Bethsaida. When evening came a storm had blown up and they were 'straining' on the oars as the wind was against them (see Mk 6:48).

The Greek word rendered 'straining' in the NIV is *basanizo*, meaning to test, to torture, to distress—a picture of the western Evangelical / Pentecostal church.

With the winds of a post-modern world blowing against her she is 'straining' on the oars. Despite their ability as seasoned fishermen, accomplished in boatmanship and experienced in storms, the winds are too strong. Like the disciples the contemporary church is exerting all her strength, training, and skill to fulfil the commission given her. But with all the resources available she cannot move forward. Over recent times the church in Australia (measured by Sunday attendance) has shrunk by 12% and in the UK by 26%. North America is not faring much better. By any measure the contemporary western church is in 'distress'.

And so, Jesus is coming to her in the fourth watch (between 3-6 AM) — in the darkest hour before dawn (see Mk 6:48). The night has been spent in a toilsome and futile labour. Exhausted, the disciples are at their wits end. But it is the watch when Jesus comes, the watch before the dawn; before the new day.

My question is twofold: from where does he come, and how does he come?

The answer is that he comes from 'outside the boat' through a 'new thing'.

This is, for the church, the worst of times, and yet the best of times; an hour of great testing and darkness on one hand, but on the other, one of great visitation and new beginnings. In her darkest hour Jesus is coming to her in a new manifestation of divine power and purpose. But she is constrained by her own strength and structures. She is self-reliant and secure in her man-made systems. She is so mired in these and so focussed on the storm, on her own effort – on physical and sensate things – that she is caught by total surprise. Jesus appears, walking on the water. This is so outside their frame-of-reference they immediately conclude that it is a ghost! How could this be of God? It is outside of their 'boat'—their man-made vessel; it is outside the design, engineering, and structures of man!

Not only that, it is a completely 'new thing'; Jesus healing the sick they knew, feeding the five thousand was OK, but what was this? It was unfamiliar and impossible, defying all the natural laws on which they were depending for their survival. Boats were designed to float on water and that's where they were staying! And so, they concluded that it was a 'phantom'—a 'ghost' (Gr *phantasma*). This manifestation was not only not of God, it had no 'substance'—it was not real; it was either a figment of the imagination, or from the ethereal world of the spirit.

Not only do they misconstrue this new visitation of God as having no substance, their response was one of fear. In a moment of time these self-assured sea-salts are reduced to abject terror shrieking for fear! (see Mk 6:49, 50).

The parallels are obvious. There is a new visitation coming to us from 'outside the boat'. A sudden and surprising manifestation of Christ is coming toward us. And it is coming from the storm-tossed seas of people—from the tumult of the nations. The God of heaven is at work in his earth. He is working through the groan of creation – through the almost

inexpressible cry of the heart in the arts and media – and through the quest of politics and business for ‘the ring of power’. He is coming walking on these oceanic shifts of creation subduing them, as history moves toward the full revealing of his sons and its ultimate liberation from bondage (Rom 8:19). As he did in the ‘Jesus Revolution’ of the 1960’s and 70’s God will again invade the youth cultures and counter-cultures. But this time he will ‘leaven the whole lump’—they will be completely captured and turned to serve the King. He will also infiltrate and conquer the wealth of the nations causing it to flood into his house extending his kingdom to all peoples, tribes, and tongues. Every idol will fall—false religions, ideologies, and philosophies will be ground to dust by the weight of the coming visitation (Dan 2:44-45). But the visitation will come from ‘outside the boat’—from outside the normal structures and patterns of the contemporary church.

At first, those in the boat will claim this visitation has no substance—that it is a ‘phantom’; a passing fad, of no consequence. By comparison, their boat with its human design and construction is far more substantial than this mere apparition. They can feel it, see it, and even row it! They even believe they can control it—despite the overwhelming force of the elements!

They will also respond with fear. Any fear of the storm will be completely overtaken by their fear of the unknown and particularly by their fear of the supernatural. It will drive them to reject this move of God. Even, many of those who are currently networking new movements of mission, of pastoral unity, and even many so-called ‘apostolic’ networks will react in fear and cling to the boat— to the structures and patterns that offer a more tangible security.

But some like Peter will be stirred in their hearts. And at the word of the Lord they will step out of the boat to come to him (see Mtt 14:28, 29). They will be irresistibly drawn from the securities of familiar patterns and structures to him. And thus stepping out of them, enter a new realm of freedom—of the miraculous. A realm of walking on water where they are no longer governed by sense-knowledge and natural reasoning! They will distinguish themselves from the rest of the disciples by their fearless hunger to be with him—to come to him ‘outside the boat’, and thus step into the ‘new thing’. They are willing to “suffer with him outside the city gates, bearing the reproach outside the camp” (Heb 13:12, 13). A study of revival history and of the coming of Christ himself eloquently teaches us that the visitation of God comes most often through the least expected avenues and usually through those of no account in the religious system.

And so, through this visitation the church will be purged of human control. The ‘out-of-church phenomenon’ (a trend being commented on by some where many thousands of mature believers have left the institutional structures of the church) is one aspect of this—of the shifts and changes from the old to the new. In my view, these masses of people are in a ‘holding pattern’ waiting for the full release of the ‘new thing’.

The institutional church will learn that its structures and patterns cannot attract the visitation. In fact, human engineering of any sort cannot attract or contain Jesus.

Jesus ‘was about to pass them by’ (Mk 6:48). He was waiting for a particular response. And so, it was only as they cried out in abject desperation that he responded. And this he did in two ways. First, he spoke to them, assuring them that the ‘new thing’ was a manifestation of himself, and second, he climbed into the boat! (Mk 6:49, 50). Through the coming visitation God will invade the structures of the church and use it to his own ends; but only when she comes to the end of herself and cries out. And so, with a divine impetus the boat is supernaturally translated to its destination (see Jn 6:21). They entered the villages and marketplace where many recognised Jesus and were healed (see Mk 6:53-56).

Can we hear what the Spirit is saying to the church?

A visitation is coming from outside the prevailing structures and patterns of the church, including our attempts at engineering new expressions. It will challenge us as to whether we will go to him outside the boat, or stay within the security of man-made structures. Could it be possible that many of us who are ‘networking’ are only reconfiguring the old—merely re-arranging the present structures? There is a new move coming so radically different we will all need to step out from where we are. It will be a reformation which turns us from hanging on to our structures to the person of Jesus—and to the principle of incarnation; the awesome reality of God manifest in a human body.

We will be faced with the choice of stepping out into his *presence* or staying with our *patterns*.

The issue is one of control. Will we hang on, toiling in our own strength—or will we let go, stepping out of the boat?

The choice is yours.

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