

PUT YOUR HAND IN THE HAND

I was driving along a few days ago, on a beautiful, warm, sunny afternoon. And I rode by a church.

There was a sign in front of the church.

The message on the sign was one I had seen on a number of occasions.

JESUS IS THE ANSWER.

For some reason, when I read that, a thought flashed through my mind.

Jesus is the answer. But what's the question?

Is Jesus the answer to any and every question we will ever ask?

You come home from a long, hard day's work, and ask, "Honey, what's for dinner?"

"Jesus."

You're stopped by a police officer. He walks up to your window, looks at you sternly and says, "Ma'am, do you know why I pulled you over?"

"Uhhh, Jesus?"

I'm being facetious, of course.

There are some questions where Jesus clearly is the answer.

When we ask if God really loves us, the answer to that question is Jesus. It says so in John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son."

That's Jesus.

When we wonder, "Is there life after death," the Apostle Paul has a ready response: "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. . . . for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."

That, too, is Jesus.

The big, esoteric theological questions are reasonably easy to respond to with “Jesus is the answer.”

God’s love? The resurrection from the dead? Okay, sure. Jesus fits the bill pretty well.

But questions about the challenges and troubles of life and the existence of suffering and evil in the world are more problematic.

Someone wonders, “How come my beloved spouse came down with cancer and die in such agony?”

Is Jesus the answer to that question?

A woman is brutally beaten and raped and left lying unconscious in some alley. How could someone be so cruel as to commit such a heinous crime?

Is Jesus the answer?

A service man survives the horrors of war and comes home very mentally and emotionally damaged. Flashbacks of the atrocities he experienced or witnessed haunt him day and night. The horrific memories just won’t go away?

Is Jesus the answer?

A young child runs out into the street to retrieve a ball that left the yard and is hit by a car and killed. The parents are devastated. They simply don’t understand why a loving God would take their child away from them in such a sudden and terrible way.

Is Jesus the answer?

When Jesus’ disciples decided to take a little boat ride with Jesus, they suddenly found themselves in the middle of a furious storm that threatened to send them to the bottom of the Sea of Galilee.

They were terrified. As their small vessel tossed and turned and rocked and rolled, they thought this was surely the end—not just the end of their ministry with Jesus, but the end of their lives. Period.

They turned to Jesus for an answer to their problem.

“Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

As is always the case in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, in the end he saves the day. Christ is victorious. Jesus tells the winds to “Quiet! Be still!” and the wind did what he commanded. It died down and there was complete calm.

We love happy endings like that, don’t we? It’s very satisfying when evil is vanquished, the good guy wins, he rides off into the sunset with a hearty “Hi-O-Sliver,” and all is well in the world.

But all too often, that's not how real life turns out.

There are many times in our mortal existence when evil seems to have the upper hand, the good guy loses, and all is not so well in the world.

When that happens, is Jesus the answer?

Maybe one answer to the many troubles and sorrows of life can be found in the words Jesus said to his disciples.

“Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

As I was reflecting on this morning's reading from Mark, some questions came into my mind.

What if Jesus hadn't stilled the water and calmed the sea? What if the storm had raged on, the boat Jesus and the disciples were in had been swamped, and all thirteen of them—along with their vessel—didn't make it to shore? What if they had all perished in the storm?

As I wondered and thought about my alternate ending to Mark's story, I imagined Jesus and the disciples sinking below the waves. And I heard Jesus ask the very same question: “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

The thing is, that seems to be a more pertinent and realistic ending to that story for life as we know and experience it.

The boat sinks, death is imminent, the disciples are terrified, and Jesus wants to know, as they descend to their watery grave, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

You see, in real life—the life we're living in—that's probably what would happen. There wouldn't be a miraculous ending. The boat would sink, we would go down with it, and we wouldn't survive. A tragic but very truthful end of the story.

And wouldn't you know it, even though that ending isn't positive and optimistic like the disciples' ending was; even though Jesus and the twelve survived their ordeal but we don't, Jesus still asks us the same question he asked them:

“Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

This is where the rubber hits the road, isn't it?

Because one day, literally or figuratively, our boat is going to sink. Our mortal lives are going to come to an end. And Jesus will still ask us to trust him. To believe in him. Right up until the end. And beyond.

Jesus asks us to not be afraid and have faith in him, not just during the storms of life, but even if we don't survive the storms. Jesus wants us to believe in him, in life and in death.

There was a popular song from the 70s that was inspired by this morning's Gospel reading. Maybe you remember it. I hope you do because we're going to be singing it in a little while. The refrain goes:

Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water.
Put your hand in the hand of the man who calmed the sea.
Take a look at yourself and you can look at others differently,
By putting your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee.

Human existence will always be uncertain and at times perilous. There's no denying that. The squalls are going to come, ready or not and like it or not. And it may be that the man from Galilee won't still the waters and calm the seas until the very end.

In other words, maybe we won't experience the "complete calm" and the stilling of the storms of our human existence until the final, absolute peace of death comes to us.

If that's the case, I think Jesus' question is even more relevant to us than it has ever been in our entire lives.

"Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

Whatever may come to us, in life and in death, my prayer is that we will be able to trust enough to put our hand in the hand of the man from Galilee.

Because when we do, whether we sink or swim, whether we live or whether we die, we will have nothing to fear.

Thanks be to God. Amen.