

Pentecost 13
Refugee Sunday
29/08/2004

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

Cracked cisterns

This week we have been confronted by the power of the imperfect. Jana Pitman wanted more than anything to leave Athens with a medal, but the task was too much for her weakened knee. The women's rowing team found that insufficient attention to the psychological strength of their members left them floundering in the water. The Bali bombers have had their sentences called into question because of the insecurity of the laws under which they were charged, and at Guantanamo Bay a tribunal has begun based on dubious standards of justice. How secure are the things we rely on in order to gain what we want? Are they solid and sound, or are they more like cracked cisterns, leaky vessels that allow to drain away the very thing we look to for sustenance and protection.

Jeremiah raised just that concern with Israel. In the prologue to this text the purity of heart and the joy of the days in the desert are recalled and celebrated, but now the honeymoon is over. In an address, like a lawsuit delivered by a wounded lover, the people are taken to task for their fickle response to God's gracious embrace. The warmth of intimacy is replaced by cool distance, forgetfulness and subverted priorities. The people had forsaken the God who gave them life and freedom and become devoted to less worthy gods. This was not a case of mere apathy; Israel had broken its covenant relationship and exchanged a faith of substance for one of dross. Even amongst the followers of lesser gods in Cyprus or Kedar such philandering was unheard of! This change of heart had far reaching consequences because the objects of human devotion affect the way we shape up in the world. In Israel, once the binding story had been forgotten - the foundations eroded and points of reference lost - public life went awry. Judges were no longer just, priests were no longer faithful, and prophets neglected their calling. Where once there had been a nourishing spring of tradition spontaneously welling up to bring life - living water - now there were cracked cisterns, leaky pits from which precious resources would drain away and be lost. Once Israel lived to the glory of God, a relationship and calling graciously given in which there was pure profit. Now it sought a different source of life and threats began to multiply.

Can a nation change its gods? Many have wrestled with this question as, in the past two or three hundred years, the Western way of life has been steadily secularized. Despite the faithfulness of many, and a rash of new believers, the claim is that most Westerners no longer see life in the light of the transcendent purposes of God. Instead we have devoted ourselves to a culture that is committed to an idea of global unity based on scientific paradigms, technology and the ideology of the free market. Our devotion to these causes is so strong it can be likened to a faith, and by the way we live we declare that our trust is in a power different from sovereignty of God. This new faith has led to the destruction of old boundaries, the disruption of established communal traditions, and the abrogation of moral, legal and ethical regimes that protected smaller or weaker

societies. The progress of the free market, in particular, is regarded as inevitable and its benefits are unquestionably promoted as good, regardless of how disruptive or depleting of human community and endeavour the process may be.

Are these ideas springs of living water for the world? Are they in any way connected with the sovereignty of God? Or are they cracked cisterns that will eventually leave our world spare and dry? Can we find a place to criticize Western culture's unquestioned devotion to its new faith? And having sought and found such a place, can we simply re-introduce the idea that God is the real source of life and power, a fountain of meaning and value in the world? Some Christians may look on in envy as the Grand Ayatollah, in a procession reminiscent of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, swooped in to restore order to Najaf! But where does the power lie for us, and how would we go about making it plain?

Cracked cisterns may be one way of describing a set of modern ideas in which we trust, but the gospel is about God whose gracious love for the world is not changed by ultimate rejection. And God still wants a relationship with us, despite all the intellectual and practical changes the world has undergone. And while God may despise cracked cisterns because they do not express the relational realities of the covenant, God still chooses to relate to us through the earthen vessel of a human life. The graphic pictures the prophets gathered around the cross. In the life of service and suffering that ended there the realities of covenant life were fully expressed, and it is to a life of such love that God's people are directed and called. This is substantially what Hebrews is about: not keeping rules but staying loyal to the covenant centred on Jesus Christ. "Let mutual love continue" - the word used is *philadelphia* - brotherly love. Not philandering, but *philadelphia* is true to covenant life.

The passage from Luke is sometimes referred to as Jesus' table talk. But actually it is more like an acted parable in which demonstrates the etiquette of life lived in the light of the Kingdom. There is no striving for the highest place, no seeking recognition through dining only with people who can reciprocate. Invitations to the Kingdom banquet are not based on who are friends or who are worthy. They are offered on the basis of those whom God wants as friends, even if they have nothing to offer and cannot repay. By this means God creates a relationship with those who are incapable of being peers; those who are enemies, unworthy, outcast and of no merit. When God gives a party the most unexpected guests are joined - that is why there is a place there for us.

Kingdom etiquette applies at the Eucharist. It is rightly a giving thanks for it is the meal of God's fidelity towards us, and ours towards God - the source of our life. If it is true that you become like the God you serve: the things humans devote ourselves to affect the way we shape up in the world, then in the Church's case it is a matter of becoming what you eat. This meal creates us, tells who we are, bring peace to our community, and nourishes us for the way.

Living water or cracked cisterns. Western culture may or may not be collapsing, but the church suffers a loss of confidence over what we really believe. We are less confident than Islam, which forcibly opposes Western devotion to its ideology, seen as of a piece with the Christian faith. We know there is no direct route from the Kingdom of God to the politics of the world, but we cannot side step the task of reflecting on one in the light of the other, and taking action where we are able. On Refugee Sunday there is hardly a more telling text than "let brotherly love continue" - but as church, and as a nation, how well are we doing? We know the Uniting Church offers many services of justice and care. But in politics or religion is what we basing our life on is living thing, or an

inferior vessel that will not deliver what we hope for? And while doing things is important, there is also responsibility to speak of the faith that motivates all our deeds. The great missionary Lesslie Newbigin once said: “words without deeds are empty, but deeds without words are dumb.” We know there is power in suffering, and that the cross, paradoxically, is a source of life because it demonstrates the fullness of love. Showing forth works that bring God glory is one thing, but the challenge is to recover enough confidence in God to speak meaningfully of our faith in the world today. If we are able to do so, others may not only see things, but also hear of and come to taste the living water we so much enjoy, and which is the well spring of our life.