

Pentecost 17
26/09/2004

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
Psalm 91
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

Writing a deed from the future

The story of the field of Anathoth is a good news story in the midst of a dark scene. The Babylonian army had laid siege to the city of Jerusalem and the king, who by now could parrot Jeremiah's melancholy message by heart, had placed him under arrest. Yet in the darkness of such an hour Jeremiah is called to purchase a block of land from his cousin who lived in the city of Anathoth. In this something ordinary happens that is slightly crazy and yet remarkably profound.

In the first place this is simply family tradition. Land is inalienable and when the need comes to sell it is offered to the closest relative. Exercising the right of redemption by purchase was a way of keeping the family inheritance intact. All this would be quite logical were it not for Jeremiah's repeated prophecies of doom. The impending circumstances showed that life was about to be severely disrupted and even cease altogether. Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel was probably trying to capitalise on the situation as he left town, but by any normal set of expectations Jeremiah's purchase was a dud deal. Yet such was his trust of God that in the middle of upheaval and despair, Jeremiah bought land and sealed the deed in a jar as he was called to do.

When he bought the field of Anathoth Jeremiah certainly did invest in the family property. But he did much more than that. He invested in the long-term future promised by God, and he did this when the options seemed completely closed off. Through this classic prophetic act carried out in obedience to God, Jeremiah gave a sign that a new future was moving towards the people, despite present circumstances. Through a deed in a jar, and the story preserved in scripture, God delivered a promise of life to the people: Houses and fields and vineyards shall be bought again in the land. A humble block held by Jeremiah's family would become a paradigm for God's promise to the whole nation and all the land they held. The message was that despite the gloomy prospects there would be life after Babylon. This statement of salvation did not subvert the coming disaster, nor did it allow those who wistfully hoped the city would not fall to be at peace. The deed, carefully placed in a jar so that it might last a long time, proclaimed that judgement, punishment and disruption were not the last word. The long-term future was to be marked by the grace of God even though, at the time, no sign of this could be seen. With God the promise of life in the future was inalienable and in this hope was Jeremiah prepared to live. For us, of course, the deed in the jar is the Cross and Resurrection which proclaim that life, not death, has the last word, and that in Jesus Christ God signalled that a new future is on its way towards us.

This text challenges us to consider what it would really mean to live according to the promised grace of God when everything in our present context seems cut off from such a possibility. It challenges us to see that to live in hope means being willing to seize the promise of life even when, to us, no life seems possible. To so live, while it has a long-term reference to the future, involves investing in something concrete now.

There is a way in which this point can be connected with the story of the rich man and Lazarus. This is a story about how the refusal of charity in the present is a violation of the law of Moses and therefore is of eternal significance. The rich man is someone whose prosperity would have been understood as a blessing of God, but he refused to share what had been given to him and brought no hope or comfort to Lazarus who lived in dire circumstances. The rich man can be taken as a symbol of the church - rich with resources and the Word of God. He had the means to end Lazarus' cruel exile but he refused. What he denied in the present weighed against him in the longer-term future. In reflecting on these texts the question may be: what would it look like for us to live hopefully in times when no hope can be expected? What would the equivalent of a field of Anathoth look like in our time?

The Babylonian captivity lasted about 70 years. In Communist Russia there were 70 years in which the Christian faith was discounted and even suppressed. During this time some churches stood open but were little used. It is said that the old women, the Babushkas, continued to go to the churches to light candles and to care for the icons: the images of the faith. By these simple actions they kept the image of Christ bright and in view. They demonstrated a hope for the future in a context which seemed hopeless, and when the exile was over those who wanted to see the face of Christ could find it once more.

We know well that the church in our time experiences increasing pressure from a secular culture and finds less and less people know the face of Christ. We experience a sort of exile in our own culture. It is useful to ask what concrete actions we can take to leave a deed in a jar for the future; to preserve the central things of the faith for those who may come along and wish to engage in it, long after we are gone. I was surprised to learn the other day that due to the fire in Ascot Vale, and the weakness of other congregations along Mt Alexander Rd, there is little UCA presence between us and Essendon. As a congregation should we think about this in terms of who we are, where we are, and the resources we have to bring to bear for being the church in the long-term future. Dare we imagine a future in which people will show a lively interest in the church? What can we do to keep the image of Christ bright? How can we plan for the long-term future as Jeremiah did?

And we may find it useful to consider this same question as we approach another election and reflect on the policies of our own and other governments in the world. In the age of terror, obsessed as it is with death, what would a deed in a jar look like? It must surely have something to do with choosing to contradict the darkness and seeking to live with hope. And we can do this because hope is of God, and is given to us as a gift. That houses and fields and vineyards will be bought again in the world means that God's intention is that, on the other side of conflict and disaster people shall again live together. In context it means they are intended to live in relationships that reflect their worship of the Creator, and their service of one another as fellow creatures of God. This is a long way from talk of pre-emptive strikes, or the refusal to bargain with hostage takers. And it is not the same as forming political alliances with conservative Christian sects for political gain. It is concerned with investing in different methods of resolving conflict, based on knowing that God has chosen all people in Christ, and to hurt others is to hurt those for whom he died. A deed in a jar for this time might now be concerned with policies and practices that emphasise the inter-relatedness of humankind rather than the demonising of those who are different. And who can doubt that if Australia expended the same amount of money and effort on fostering relationships in our region, rather than being at war in other places, we would undoubtedly be making a good

investment in the future.

This is an important time and we are in we are blessed with a prophetic sign which shows the deed under which we live has been written from the future where life is laid up for us. Jeremiah's deed in a jar may not look like a grand plan for church renewal, or a glossy social policy for the nation, but it points us to the place where true hope can be found and offers us an alternative way. It sets us free to live life to the full now. This is the real wealth. With this to rely on Christians are free to become vocal, courageous and active, investing now in concrete ways that make a difference long term. Buying for themselves treasure which does not rust, and no thief can steal.