

Easter 3
30/04/06

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 3: 11-19
1 John 3: 1-7
Luke 24: 36b-48.

Resurrection

Sermon by John Hudson

Wonder, terror, fear, and joyful disbelief were experienced by those who encountered their Risen Lord in the upper-room in Jerusalem on that “first day of the week”; for so we read in Luke’s Gospel. In the Acts of the Apostles, (Luke’s follow-up best seller!), Peter’s post-Pentecostal preaching elicits a similar response of wonder and amazement from his Israelite contemporaries, as they witness the healing of the lame man in the Temple precinct.

Peter quickly disabuses them of their misplaced belief in any healing power located in his or John’s personal power or piety, and by a skilful rehearsal of the Faith of Israel, referring to “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our ancestors (Acts 3:13).” Calling them friends, he indicates that *this* God, *their* God, has glorified Jesus and raised Him from the dead, even though they crucified Him, to become the “Author of life”.

So it is by the name of Jesus that not only this healing occurs, but the purpose of God’s history with His people Israel is now fulfilled.

It is at this point that words like, wonder, astonishment and amazement take on a new significance for the ongoing belief of Israel, the nascent Church, and for the history of the world, then, and in our own time.

‘Wonder’, as Israel experiences it in today’s reading, is a seeking after ‘signs’, which Peter tries to correct, and Paul warns against in first Corinthians: “for Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:22).” If a true knowledge of God is sought for, and confirmed only in personal or community expectations and experiences, and *not* in the sustaining ‘wonder’ of God’s gift of Himself as He chooses, and the subsequent call of obedience to such wonder; then that person or community will not simply be astonished at their *disappointment*, but will be in danger of profound disillusionment and self-destruction. Listen to this one warning among many from the life-giving Law of the Old Testament, from the book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 28, Vs 28. It is not just a warning against being a bit naughty, but being disobedient to the source, the soul, of one’s very existence, the ‘wonder’ of Israel’s calling.

I’m reading from the Authorized Version for reasons I will soon make clear. The text says, “The Lord shall smite thee with madness, and blindness, and astonishment of

heart". So, while astonishment, wonder, fear, and yes, even disbelieving joy, may be a reasonable initial emotional response to what God says and does, it is not a justifiable end in itself, for it leads to a belief in the wrong thing. Israel cannot hang on to a God that is locked into laws, holy wisdom, and animal sacrifice, no matter how ancient and revered.

The Church cannot cling to the presence of Jesus among them on the road to Emmaus or in a rented room in Jerusalem when the wonder of it all is based upon *their* ability to believe that resurrection is possible (or is it resuscitation or even reincarnation?). Nor can they prove that He is still alive by arranging conducted tours of a slightly used empty tomb in the Garden of Gethsemane.

That He appeared among them and they recognized Him, they cannot deny. But the wonder of His presence, which the Church continues to enjoy, will be of His choosing, by His appearing and disappearing, in moments of sublime recognition on the road and in the upper room.

And how does this come to be? To listen and look to where He makes obedient faith possible. On the road to Emmaus, in the Upper Room, and in this church today, He makes Himself known in the reading and preaching of the Scriptures, in the Breaking of the Bread and in the prayer of the church. In Word and Sacrament He puts Himself in *our* hands. That's the true 'wonder' of it all, and if that doesn't cause us to constantly have a sense of anticipatory wonder, then we are dead in our sins.

The essential point is not to believe in 'resurrection', but to have faith in the Risen One. This is what the original witnesses attested to after Pentecost. The gift of the Spirit enabled them to go beyond a preoccupation with the 'how' of the resurrection, to faith in the One who had been raised. The sign that they knew their risen Lord and that He knew them, is given in Acts where we are told that, "they devoted themselves to the Apostles doctrine, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2: 32)." Whilst it is true that the life of God within Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, cannot be penetrated by human endeavour, in this sense He is unknowable. But it is not true to say that we don't know who and what God is for us as human beings. The preoccupation of many inside and outside the church to piously continue to search for "the light of God," as if there is value in the quest itself, is doomed to succeed in their endless quest. For they do not look, as Paul says in 2nd Corinthians, to the God who said "let light shine out of the darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4: 6)".

But Christ is raised not just for Israel and the Church, but for the whole creation, for the entire world. And here we return to the quote from Deuteronomy 28 Vs 28 "The Lord shall smite thee with madness, and blindness, and astonishment of heart". I return to it because it is part of the Law of God to which Jesus directed Israel and the Church in His post resurrection teaching, and also because in it's Authorized version form, part of the text is the title of a Play and Film written and directed by the famous playwright of the 20's and 30's, Noel Coward. As secular playwrights, poets and artists often do, Coward

skilfully extracts the devastating negative meaning of this text in his play, “The astonished heart”.

Very briefly, it tells of the interaction of a psychiatrist, his female lover and his wife. Instead of descending into a predictable performance of hate and accusation, the actors deal sympathetically with each other while in full knowledge of the reasons that have brought them to the doctor’s deathbed. His adulterous affair has brought about his professional and marital demise and now he lies dying of a serious heart disease. The play strongly suggests that his fatal “astonishment of heart” occurs because he has gone against everything that his professional and marital oath has made him. The “world” cannot relegate the crucified and risen One to some convenient corner forever to be labelled “religion” and thereby ignored. To be sure it will try to find its life in the lifelong pursuit of “nothingness” for that is truly the celebrated and enthusiastic belief of our time. And for this the church must take some responsibility; for in its proclamation of the Gospel that Christ is Lord of all, the old gods have gone, the old certainties destroyed and the world is left to believe in ‘nothing’ but itself or to believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of our Icons depicts Jesus as Pantocrator, the Lord of heaven and earth the One who is ‘All in All’. He is merciful toward all His creation, *all* His people in their obedience and their disobedience. For the proof of who and what God is for us in Jesus Christ is when He stands before us today in all His risen glory in *these* Scriptures and the preaching, *this* table and in *this* fellowship, and shows us His hands and His side. Can we therefore fail to be filled with anything but a God given “wonder, love, and praise”.