

Epiphany 3
21/1/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19:7-14

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Joy and challenge in the word of God

Nehemiah was a Persian, appointed Governor of Judea 70-80 years after the people returned from exile. It was a time of social, political and economic reconstruction. While walls and houses and social institutions were being rebuilt, the people wanted to refresh their knowledge of the Law of Moses, the foundation of their faith. Ezra the priest was called to help. Scholars argue about how what was read compares with other sections of the Law. But what stands out is the conduct and reception of the reading. The people built a pulpit like structure, and attentively gathered around it. This was not like the colonial period in Australia when the government imposed bible reading on prisoners in chains, believing it was a tool for social improvement. There was no coercion here. Ezra responded to the desire of the people's hearts. The Law of Moses was known to them but, because of lack of familiarity or change in language, they needed to hear it again and refresh their understanding. They were "given the sense" by interpreters who set it in context, much as a sermon seeks to express, in today's language, something said long ago in the scriptures.

The people appear to express grief over what was read to them. Was this because they saw how far they had strayed from God's purposes, and felt a sense of conviction? Or was it because hearing something they had lost track of for a long time made them realise what they missed? Were their tears like those who hear a Shakespearean play and are swept away by the beauty of the language? The tears do not prevent great joy and delight emerging, and it is clear that the people understood what they had heard.

Listening to the Law was not some sort of fundamentalist exercise in rote learning. Nor was it a call to revere a set of abstract philosophical principles. The people re-engaged with their tradition in a way that was enlivened in their context: it touched them deeply. It brought release and renewal to their hearts and lives, and they recommitted to God. The Law became a source of deep joy and strength, much as it is celebrated in the Psalm for today. And this renewal of faith ran in tandem with the social and material reconstruction of the rest of their lives. Word and deed went

together. Restructure and spiritual renewal were partners. Faith and social life went hand in hand.

What we see in Nehemiah occurs again with great power in Luke. Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, interprets Isaiah's words as applying to his ministry. Now is the long expected day of fulfilment. He is the suffering servant who will turn the hopes of the poor into reality, and bring the amnesty and freedom expected in the year of Jubilee. Even more remarkably than in Nehemiah, Jesus' "interpretive" approach to Scripture causes him to actually diverge from what Isaiah said. There is no mention of the call to bind up the broken-hearted, which might be covered in other ways. But he omits entirely an announcement of the day of the Lord's vengeance. In their place he emphasises the concepts of **release and acceptance**. **Release** - referred to people being set free from their enslavements: the many ways in which they have been oppressed and distracted from a fulfilling faith and life. And Jesus not only proclaimed the year of the Lord's favour - the time when God would move towards the people in **acceptance** - he announced that it was now fulfilled in the very things he was doing. The "content" of his sermon was in the spin he put on Isaiah's words, and in his actions. To hear and see, and to grasp the difference, was to begin to participate in the very thing that was on offer. It was like seeing the light, when you already thought you could see.

This was a powerful day in the Synagogue at Nazareth. There was a great murmuring about it. At first the mood was receptive, but next week we shall see how the proclamation of God's acceptance infuriated the audience, and put Jesus in risk of his life. They may have preferred him to retain the message of vengeance, especially if it meant they could use it to pick off their enemies. The trouble was, the sort of release and acceptance he was speaking about, and declared to be embodied in his work, challenged their faith, and their social and religious structures. It implied a deep and transforming conversion of life. Would they be brave enough to live in the acceptance God was showing them? What Jesus proclaimed meant the whole world had to change.

Both of these readings make it clear that what comes to us in word and tradition is not fixed, in the concrete, literal way that some would have us believe. There is flexibility and room for innovation. Jesus was not a fundamentalist, and Holy Writ is not another version of the Golden Calf, before which we bow with minds shut down. There was great joy in understanding the message at the heart of Scripture. People found themselves addressed by God, and called to live in freedom and justice. It is also true that the Word, or the Law, or the Gospel, is not some

abstraction that has no bearing on the actual realities of life. It affects all the ways in which we live. It is life giving, renewing, releasing, sight-giving, and much more. The popularity of the Luke passage amongst Social Justice operatives led some to try and locate the centre of faith away from that emphasis. But this is not true to what is found here. Incarnation brings justice to all, and those who seek to follow the incarnate Lord will have to face the challenge of what it means to express their faith incarnationally.

Kevin Rudd is in the news these days. Because of his clearly stated Christian commitment, and his interest in the life and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his name has become associated with a growing discourse about faith and politics. Rudd has been criticized for saying that a theology of social justice is central to Christianity. Commentators who deplore this may not realise how Bonhoeffer spoke up for the Jews when he said, “Open your mouth for the dumb” and “Only those who cry out for the Jews may sing Gregorian Chant”. In addition to being a committed pacifist, Bonhoeffer promoted a form of Christian life that was solidly focussed on life in the world, with all the social implications that brings.

This year it is 200 years since William Wilberforce brought to Parliament the actions that ended slavery. This involved a new reading of Scripture - based on the Spirit of what Jesus said and did - rather than on the apparent New Testament approval of slavery. The challenge brought about a deep conversion of life for many Christian plantation owners. And especially, it brought liberty to those who were, literally, enslaved, and yet in their oppression had found freedom and joy in the Word of God. There is joy in the knowledge that God has accepted us. And, whether we are slave or free, there is challenge in seeking to live by what we have heard. But a life of freedom and joy is only possible if we continue to open ourselves to what God has said, listen deeply, and accept the gift that has been given.