

29/04/2007

Genesis 12:1 - 9

Psalm 118

1 Peter 5:5 - 14

Mark 3:13 - 19

The Congregation as the Apostolic Community

25 April is Mark the Evangelist's day, and every year at this time we set aside a Sunday to remember him, with whose name and work we have chosen to identify this congregation. Mark was not one of the twelve disciples. He was a cousin of Barnabas, companion to Peter and Paul and traveled abroad to spread the gospel. In later life he went to Alexandria, where he founded the church, became its first bishop, and is believed to have been martyred there in the eighth year of Nero's reign. It is because Mark was Peter's companion and disciple that we have his gospel. The Christians in Rome insisted he write down everything he had learned about Jesus from Peter. Mark, whose symbol is the lion was the first to coin the term 'the Gospel' – to refer to the good news of Jesus Christ.

In Mark 3:13- 14 we read -

[Jesus] went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.

This is the only time the word "apostle" is used in Mark, but it is the seed of a great thought that has spread through the church. What is the vocation of an Apostle, and what qualities does it call for? And since we are accustomed to confess our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed "*we believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church*", we may also reflect on what it means for us to belong to the Apostolic community, the church.

An Apostle is one who is sent out, a messenger who is authorized to act in a particular way for the one who sends. In Greek Literature the word stood for the herald who was sent to arrange a truce. Although the word is rare in biblical literature, it is a powerful concept. The one sent carries the full authority of the sending one. When the Apostle speaks, the one who sends speaks. If we think of God as the sender, and the world as at odds with God, there is a wonderful thought in the idea that Jesus Christ, the one he sent, is to bring about a truce between God and the people of the world. What makes the Gospel good news is that fact that everything Jesus represents is the outcome of God's loving decision to heal creation. He is, as Bonhoeffer says, the God man, and the man for others who showed what it means to be truly human. The Church that follows him is to be the Church for others too. There is a link with the call of Abraham. God did not call Abraham for his own sake, but through him

God aimed to raise up a people through whom the world would be blessed.

The section we read from Mark is set against a background of deepening blindness towards Jesus and growing resistance to what he is doing. In this context Jesus retreats to the mountain, always a place of revelation from God. He chose others to be with him. This is not a statement about companionship. It is about discipleship and formation for mission. These are to be his people who will learn from him. They are not a select group of leaders, or sect like community who are closed to the world. The twelve are named apostles – sent ones. They are to be a community of messengers, a New People of God sent forth to invite everyone to embrace the news Jesus embodied in his words and deeds. The Apostles are called act with his authority, exemplified in the capacity to set free all who are bound or oppressed by the forces of darkness. There are many illustrations of what that might mean. But in the power of the symbolism of the Easter Season it is possible to see this will mean they will go forth to carry out their mission in the weakness and poverty exemplified by God's life amongst us in Jesus Christ. It means being good shepherds, fools for Christ, and wounded healers. This means that in seeking to share the message of God's work in Christ they will make no appeal to self-interest, they will fraternize with the marginalized, and will not choose the evil way by resorting to the use of violence, intimidation or deception. With true apostles there can be no conversions won at the point of gun or sword, or through political wheeling and dealing. If this were John we were reading, we would recall Jesus' words: as the Father sent me, so I send you.

The first period on the history of the Christian movement is called the Apostolic age. Great importance is attached to it. The church has debated whether the original twelve, as named in lists like we heard today, were the only Apostles. Paul was not named in the lists, but he defended his right to be called an Apostle on the grounds that Jesus Christ called him to a ministry of reconciliation. Paul's claim forms part of a broadening understanding of who was to be counted among the Apostles.

As time went by the role of Apostle came to represent the highest office of the church. Its chief vocation was not leadership as such. It was to preach the gospel to those who had not heard the message. In modern usage the person who was the first missionary to a new place was named its Apostle. Paul is the "Apostle of the Gentiles", Augustine of Canterbury the "Apostle of England", St Patrick the "Apostle of Ireland", Sts Cyril and Methodius "Apostles of the Slavs."

As Christians seeking to live out our faith in the world today, what does it mean that we are heirs to a concept Apostleship as the sent ones, and that we confess we believe in "*one holy, catholic and apostolic church*"? Our confession is a statement about our participation in a message and style of community life that comes from a very long time ago. But it is also a sign there is some essential continuity between the first Apostles and us. This is a living tradition, not a dead thing. There is some way in which, like the twelve, we seek to stay with Jesus in order to be formed for mission by the pattern of his life and message.

We do this, not for mere antiquarian interest. It is remembering is for the sake of the mission. In reflecting here as we do regularly, we seek to be renewed in our knowledge of what our forebears had from God, that we may be equipped for the task

of passing it on in the world of our day. All lands may have heard it; there are many places in our own neighborhoods where its light and life may yet reach. This is a difficult task. Many of the social, cultural and intellectual currents at work around us today mean that our message struggles to be heard. It is hard to get beyond repeated phraseology we learn here. But let us remember that in a world where even body language is analysed, everything the church does speaks. Even if we do nothing, we are sending a message to our community.

The role of the Apostle is rarely mentioned in Mark, but he wrote down the message, and he coined the name Good News. He found life in this story, and the Church has learned much from him over the years. Mark also went out to far off places to share what he knew. The Gospel needs messengers, people who in word and deed show forth the life that comes to us here. By the grace of God we too may be Apostles: messengers who translate into living reality for our neighborhoods the good news Mark lived and died to have us know.