

Easter 5
6/05/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 11:1 - 18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1 - 6
John 13:31 – 35

Trust, control, and the ongoing conversion of the Church

During the Season of Easter we read from the Acts of the Apostles and as the weeks go by we hear the response that came to the preaching of the resurrection. From the moment the women found the empty tomb the church has struggled to accommodate this news, and its implications. But the striking thing is the level of transformation and change reported. The stories are about how the Good News of Jesus Christ is translated across every barrier that normally divides people. By the time we get to today's reading about the conversion of a Gentile, a crowd of scoffers have become repentant believers (Ch 2), a person from the exotic ends of the earth has become a baptised believer (Ch 8), and Saul of Tarsus has dramatically turned from persecuting the church to become a courageous apostle (Ch 9). These changes of mind and heart take place because of the Holy Spirit, not because of any superior strength or understanding in the apostles or their skills at manipulating situations. What is noticeable is that the Spirit directs them to go beyond the boundaries of their community. It is part of Luke's method in Acts to show that, in the power of the Spirit, the Gospel has indeed gone out to all the world to transform and reshape boundaries and beliefs.

Those of us who had an evangelical upbringing learned that the goal of mission was the conversion of souls. Conversion was like an end in itself and was thought of as instantaneous, momentary. "Just as I am without one plea" we used to sing. But the standard evangelical view is not what Act gives us. The God who takes us does not leave us as we are. Conversion is the place where barriers are broken, lives are turned around, and new communities are formed where none were expected. Conversion is not the proud possession of the individual but is always connected to service, and to the community of faith. Paul's conversion, which is reported three times, required reflection, interpretation and confirmation from the community. And today Peter, who had already been challenged three times to reaffirm his call to leadership of the disciples, is called to another level of conversion. The Spirit calls him to live as Jesus had done and make no distinction between himself and the outsider. This leads him to transgress the old rules binding faith and culture and reach out to Cornelius the gentile. Remember, the rules Peter reluctantly broke were thought to be of God. Here the Spirit of God reveals a more transcendent view of life to him in which all things are being made new. While Peter had to account for what he had done, he and the church were led by God to experience a new level of conversion, which came about because of something God called them to do.

We can think of conversion on a broader screen. If we look beyond Acts and think about the church as it moves through history, mission is about translating the message

into every language and culture. In this process, just as with Peter and Cornelius, the church will continue to experience conversion. This will come about as it is called to face new developments in the life of the world, which test the meaning of its faith and life. Christianity can be translated into any culture, or respond to any cultural change. But this is not a call to simply accommodate to all new ideas in an endless series of novel innovations. In the West the idea of belonging to the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church has been taken to mean that there is a high degree of uniformity in what the church holds. Actually, a huge diversity exists between Christians, and a different approach to being Holy, Catholic and Apostolic would be to think less about uniformity and more about finding the essence, the essential connection with what the tradition holds. The Spirit speaks to us in many ways, one of which is through cultural change and new discoveries. Through these trends we may be challenged to see and hear things in the tradition, which have remained covered over or have been ignored. The calling of the church is move out in trust from the comfortable place where it has settled and feels in control, to rediscover its essence in the face of the next challenge.

In the last few hundred years there have been many ways in which the church has been tested, here are a few. The first was at the level of cosmology, when Copernicus and Galileo revealed that the earth was not the centre of the universe. Their views had implications for the way the universe was understood, and the biblical and theological support that was given to that. Some things about the way the bible was being read had to change. Like Peter faced with his dream there were those said: “No, Lord”. Thankfully, others did explore further. The second challenge is symbolized by Darwin’s proposals in the natural sciences, which meant that the theology of creation had to be revisited. There are still churches, which resist these ideas though most have found a way through. The third challenge comes from the realm of the social sciences, which have raised many new understandings of social relationships and sexuality. There is much resistance here, and it is going to take a lot longer for us to work out the implications. Every one of these challenges is a call to conversion: a new beginning and a new chapter of life. There is much to think about as the church considers how to take the Gospel into “all the world”. The question is, will the church listen to the Spirit in these challenges and rediscover its vocation, or will it resist and seek to stay safe and comfortable? In the case of Peter and Cornelius the Spirit dragged the church kicking and screaming into God’s movement into a new frontier of life. Left to its own devices the church may not have gone there and the Spirit would have had to find another way to take the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Also consider Cornelius. He was the living proof that the Gospel was for the whole world. He was the outsider, the new consideration, which raised the challenge of how to translate the Gospel afresh. Cornelius’ inclusion in the fellowship resulted from his own openness to the Spirit and his willingness to receive the gift of being turned towards the truth of God. An aspect of the church’s discernment will be to consider whether or not what is new is receptive to the questions of meaning raised by the church, or whether it has to be challenged to embrace a bigger view of life.

The Germans have a saying; *trust is good, control is better*. Although the leaders of the church at Jerusalem at first gave Peter a please explain, they had a change of heart. Their instinct was to control who could receive the Gospel, but the Spirit would not allow that to happen. Trust won over control, they went through an

experience of conversion, gave up their old attitude, and did not stand in the way of God. Their receptivity opened the way for many who thirsted to drink from the spring of the water of life, and they learned again what it meant to love as Jesus loved. Change and turning are part of the Christian life because God's will in Jesus Christ is to make all things new. In him we are invited to find our life in a community that that draws its life from the one who gave his life to reveal God's generous love for all the world.