

Pentecost 14
2/09/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 2:4 - 13

Psalm 81

Hebrews 13:1 – 8, 15 - 16

Luke 14:1, 7 – 14

Living by the great reversal.

In July this year a group of senior world leaders was formed called “The Elders”. The members include Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton, Desmond Tutu, Mary Robinson, Jimmy Carter and Kofi Annan. None of The Elders hold office, but the group will aim to work for the common good by tackling some of the world's most difficult problems through diplomacy. Nelson Mandela said: "This group can speak freely and boldly, working both publicly and behind the scenes... Together we will work to support courage where there is fear, foster agreement where there is conflict, and inspire hope where there is despair." This is a positive initiative. In an age where the young are idolized and the wisdom of the elderly is questioned, it is good to see the wealth of experience represented in this group being put to such use. But will governments welcome The Elders’ efforts at freelance diplomacy?

Today we shall commission Ann Wilkinson as an Elder and so it is a good opportunity to ask what this means. Eldership is an office in the congregation, and has its origins in the New Testament where the first style of governance in the church was a collegiate form shared by teachers, pastors, deacons and elders, following a pattern used to administer the Synagogues (Acts 11:30, 15:22). At first there was no distinction in status between the different roles but then developed the role of overseer (bishop) and from the second century the overseers became presidents of the councils of elders. So grew the tradition that is now expressed in the Episcopal churches.

Calvin’s contribution to the Reformation was to recover the earlier form collegiate ministry as the basis for leading the congregation, and the church. In the Presbyterian Church, which evolved from his ideas, the pastoral role in the congregation was undertaken by the “teaching elder,” - known to us as Minister of the Word who shared the leadership of the congregation with a group of “ruling elders”, commissioned to exercise spiritual oversight. As the Uniting Church was forming the Commission on Church Union recognized that an important insight of the Reformed tradition was that it “took into the oversight of the congregation... laity... involved in the vocations of the world, [who] symbolised the reaching out of the ministry of the Church into the secular occupations of everyday life.” (*Second Report on Union*). In this structure worship and mission stood shoulder to shoulder as Ministers and lay people had different but complimentary roles that were equally concerned with the life of the congregation and its mission in the world.

The Uniting Church defined elders as “members of the congregation in good standing, ...who adhere to the Basis of Union... [and are] endowed with by the Spirit with gifts fitting them for rule and oversight”. (*Basis of Union, para 14b*). The “spiritual oversight” of the Elders “may be exercised through pastoral visitation, teaching, encouraging members of the Congregation in mission, and assisting the Minister in

leadership in worship, the administration of the sacraments, and other areas of congregational life.” (*Regulation 3.1.10*) This collegiality is “for building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining its members in hope and leading them to a fuller participation in Christ’s mission in the world” (*Constitution, para 18a*).

Eldership is a significant role, with a proud history. The intention of appointing Elders is not to subvert the role of the Minister or the mission of the congregation but to extend it, within the congregation and beyond it into the world, on the basis of the different parts of the body working together.

We often think of mission as reaching out, but it also includes the idea of being – the way we live out the Gospel together. During our studies on Bonhoeffer earlier this year we reflected on his high idea of Jesus Christ as the centre of the church, which is in turn the hidden centre of the state/world. Bonhoeffer’s idea is that God gave expression to the inner basis of reality by becoming human in Jesus Christ. This basis is relevant to all, but is vested firstly in the church. Jesus Christ is God’s “man for others” in whom we have been provided with a new vision of human life. He is the living expression of what the rule of God looks like when it is applied to the human situation and what he gives is the basis on which we may structure a responsible life.

That God became human does not mean humans should now be put on a pedestal and idolized. We are still creatures of God. But God becoming human does mean humanity has been invested with a special respect, so that it would be unfaithful of us to despise our brothers and sisters or act destructively towards them. Jesus Christ demonstrates what it means that God has become human. He graciously and inclusively loved humanity to the full, in life and death. And what we see in him is a challenge to the way humans normally function and think. This is especially clear in the Gospel today.

In the ancient world a banquet was commonly the setting for philosophical discussions. It is part of Luke’s presentation of Jesus as philosopher and prophet that he is often at table, where the meals are contexts for demonstrating the rule of God. And we are right to see Jesus at table as a pointer to the Messianic Banquet of which the Eucharist is a foretaste.

At first it seems that Jesus’ advice about seeking the right seat offers little that varies from the wisdom of the ancient world. But he challenges those whose frame of mind is to seek exaltation. He is speaking to those who, as far back as chapter 10, were marked out as “seeking to justify themselves”. The greatest challenge comes in verse 11: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” The quest for respect in the eyes of others is one that gains us nothing in the eyes of God who will bring about a complete reversal of fortunes amongst the self-seekers. The reversal is based upon what God [himself] does amongst us when, as first, God becomes last in the God-man. This action of God redefines the code of reciprocity, overturning received ideas of shame and honour. Whereas in Greek culture lowliness was regarded as a vice, here it is distinctly a virtue practiced by those who continue to place their trust in God, a trust expressed in their following of the man for others, whose grace towards us all allows us to consciously undo our urges towards self seeking.

The following instructions: “when you give a party, don’t invite your friends” attacks some key ideas about hospitality and shows what living by God’s reign looks like. The lame, the blind and the crippled were marginalised and excluded from the priesthood in Israel. The Qumran sect went even further, excluding them from the great banquet at the end of time. Jesus initiates a new style of community, which is not obsessed with status seeking or physical perfection. In this community the marginalised, who have no hope of returning hospitality, are given pride of place, undermining the competitive regime of normal invitation lists. This is not only a challenge to the rulers of the Synagogue – it is a radical proposal for our life together as church. The expression of such hospitality is true to Hebrews call for mutual love to remain, and it militates against the circle of love being too narrow. Such a stance bears the cruciform mark of self-denial that is the measure of the kingdom, and is to be carried into every area of life. To live in this way is to choose to continue in the relationship that has been gifted to us in Jesus Christ, rather than respond to the false ideologies that call us to seek power and prestige, and marginalize the weak the helpless. It is to continue to drink at the fountain of living water, rather than place our trust in the cracked cisterns offered by the self-centred spirit of the age.

The great reversal is good news for those who have no hope, but it is bad news for those who are sure of themselves. The great reversal is perfectly reflected in the Magnificat, Mary’s song, a version of which we will sing at the end of this service as we go to unveil the plaque for the Commemorative Sculpture.

As we commission Ann to her role, and share the meal at the Lord’s Table, we also pause to remember the midwives who, in faithfulness to the God who called them, were prepared to live according to a different sovereignty from the one that drove their context. They lived by the great reversal and their work, like the work of Elders and congregations is intended to be, was humbly directed towards enabling life for others, even to the point of risk for themselves.