

Pentecost 16
16/09/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 4:11 – 12, 22 - 28

Psalm 14

Hebrews 1 Timothy 1:12 - 17

Luke 15:1 – 10

Fools, acting as if there is no God

The reading from Jeremiah is a message of unremitting judgment. Through him the prophetic word of God comes like a blast of searing hot wind, not to cleanse or purify, but to convey a message of utter despair and devastation. The cause is the state of the people whose God-relationship has broken down. They are fools because they no longer have any consciousness of God, and have and have given up all sense of respect and care for others. As fools they know many things, but none of them good. They have become skilled and cunning in doing evil while numbed to the social and political realities around them. What one philosopher said: “Where God is not, all things are possible” has become true of God’s people.

Jeremiah’s dark prophecy was an attempt to penetrate the anaesthetized conscience of his audience, a state reminiscent of the mindset created in Nazi Germany where propagandists operated on the principle of repeating lies so often that people came to regard them as the truth. Versions of this are found today. George Lakoff (*Don’t Think of an Elephant*, 2004) and Don Watson (*Weasel Words*) both refer to the use and abuse of language in public life, where words no longer means what they say, and often become coded appeals to fear and prejudice.

After speaking of God’s “stupid children” Jeremiah has a vision of the world. “I looked on the earth, and lo it was waste and void, and to the heavens and they had no light.” This is not a new subject. The Godless mindset of the people and the internal failure of their social life links directly to the return of Creation to its primal state. Where the people of God stray from their calling chaos comes again.

Jeremiah’s prophecy is a challenge, but it is a poem, not a blueprint for the future. It is a rhetorical attempt to engage a people of numbed conscience in a new imaginative embrace. They, who have fallen into living “as if” there is no God, are being called to imagine a world in which God’s holy patience has run out. Just as we have to face the truth about the human contribution to climate change, Israel is challenged to answer for its part in the breakdown of life. The extreme images of Jeremiah’s poem are to shock Israel into appreciating the depth of feeling God attached to their failure in relationship. The only line which seems to offer hope: “Yet I will not make a complete end” – even so probably means - there is more destruction to come!

Jeremiah’s prophecy is not that remote from us. Thoughtful people already know that we cannot continue to pollute the oceans or endlessly expand our use of fossil fuels without degrading life and suffering irreparable losses. Sensitive souls know that if we fail to address the issues of poverty and justice that affect the majority of the world’s population, the price will be paid in the breakdown of human lives and

community. And if we continue to spend our resources on expanding our skills in creating weapons of mass destruction to protect us against imagined enemies, the more likely it is the world will suffer some sort of non-redeemable holocaust. Jeremiah places human responsibility for the gravity and depth of human sin right at the centre and provokes the question: what if there is no way out of this?

The rest of our texts have something else to say, but they do not let us off the hook too easily. They point to the possibility of redemption, by reconnecting with the One who is the source of true wisdom and knowledge. But there is a cost. This wisdom and knowledge takes its final shape in the Cross, the event in which we see both the grave reality of human sin, and the triumph of divine grace. The problem is, this wisdom is disparaged. To live from this wisdom is to be a fool in the eyes of the world, because it means to live by faith and hope, rather than by sight.

When we begin with the prophets we can easily become anxious and end up focused only on guilt and the problems and difficulties. But even Jeremiah sought the release and redemption which lies at the heart of our story. The life of the church began in an enormous explosion of joy because it became known that the author and sustainer of all life had entered our history to break the power of death in all its forms. That is why the disciples returned to Jerusalem and were continually in the Temple praising God. The resurrection of Jesus was a kind of nuclear explosion of that sent out a great cloud of life-giving grace. Paul tells Timothy of the transformation it brought to him. He, who was once a terrorist: a blasphemer, persecutor and a man of violence, was encountered by a resource of grace that turned his life inside out. The power of God, revealed in the self-giving love of Jesus Christ, created this change.

Luke shows us more of the power of grace at work. In the conflict between the religious leaders and Jesus over his practice of receiving the unworthy and eating with them, his actions and his parables reveal his rationale. The lost, the despised and the unclean, whom the righteous would exclude from table fellowship and probably worship, are the objects of generous, restoring love. The ability of the lost to receive the grace at work in Jesus means they change places with the righteous who have become fools. In the process Jesus the teacher has, in the eyes of his critics, risked becoming unclean. His use of parables about a shepherd and a woman, both from the underside of society, reinforces the point of his own actions. Even the despised and unclean are capable of seeking what is lost. Jesus asks those who object to his friendships: "Which one of you..." would not act like this? And at the same time in him the tax collectors and prostitutes have welcomed the grace they knew they had lost, or had had stolen from them.

The righteous ones, who were offended by Jesus' parables, proved that although they thought they were doing the right thing, they were indeed lost. Their lives, lived under the name of God, were in practice Godless. At the same time the joy of table fellowship between Jesus and sinners reflects the great burst of heavenly joy that rings out whenever even one of the lost is restored.

The amazing thing is that God has created a people, a company of the righteous, to be the means through which God seeks to achieve the divine will in the world. That is why it is so important they are not fools, but continue to live in attentive awareness of the deeper meaning of their relationship.

*Amazing Grace, (how sweet the sound)
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.*

This song, currently enjoying popularity through the film celebrating the end of the Slave Trade, is not just about the personal lostness of John Newton. It is also about how Christian people had to overcome their lostness - the numbness of their consciences in regard to slavery. Christians were themselves guilty of human trafficking, and had to turn their lives around before others could find dignity and life.

It is easy for us to see how wrong slavery was, and to wonder at how the people of God were party to such a thing. But slavery still exists in the world, along with other forms of human trafficking. Women are sold into sex slavery, even in Australia. We know of the sale of body parts by people in poor countries to keep rich westerners alive, and there is an ongoing trade in embryos and other human tissue. And let us not neglect the treatment of the Sri Lankans on Nauru, who instead of being offered places here, are being sent off to other countries. Australia's office on Nauru has become a human trading post.

The calling of the people of God is to continually seek to live by divine wisdom, rather than human folly. It is to be alert to the ways in which we may, even now, be unconsciously "going along with evil, warfare, prejudice and greed" as it says in the prayer of confession. To be the people of God means always being ready to allow the Holy Spirit to turn us inside out and face the other way, because, when we least expected it, we had become lost fools, and were acting as if there is no God.