

Epiphany 2
20/01/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 49:1 - 7

Psalm 40

1 Corinthians 1:1 - 9

John 1:29 - 42

Called to witness and serve

John the Baptist is surprisingly popular in the Gospels and the Liturgy. He never appears on Christmas cards even though he shows up twice in Advent. He appears once more at the Baptism of Jesus, and here he is again today. There is only so much you can say about him, but that is the point: there was one who came after him who was more important. As the Prologue of the fourth Gospel tells us the Baptist was called by God to be the forerunner. He was sent as a witness to the Word: the living, creative energy of God, which streamed out towards us and was embodied in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

The call of the Baptist had important implications. When he started preaching God had turned towards us and would soon dwell among us. His preaching called people away from their present concerns to be ready for the one who was to come. In the graphic, the Baptist points to Jesus who stands on the bank of the Jordan River. It looks a bit like a new horizon, and so it is: a new horizon of life that is opening up, not just for Israel but for all people in the world, because the life in him was the life of all. As a witness to Jesus the Baptist is unsurpassed. And he did not use his nearness to Jesus for his own advantage. His capacity to accept the subservient role demonstrated he truly understood his call to be a witness.

One of the consequences of the Baptist's role is seen in the reading today. This is the time of year when the Gospel readings lead us to focus on the call to discipleship and the fishermen who leave their nets and follow Jesus. But in the fourth gospel they left their previous teacher, John the Baptist. The change of allegiance took place because of his resolute stand that **he** was **not** the one to come. When he testified that he saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus, marking him as the Holy One of God, this was not a passing moment. The Spirit 'descended and remained' on Jesus, a sense captured in the word 'abide' used later in the fourth gospel. There was a sustained, mutual indwelling: Jesus was gifted with and dwelt within the life giving energy of God, which he in turn confers on others. The whole of his work was accomplished in communion with this life-giving Spirit. He was the Servant of God, Isaiah's Polished Arrow, hidden for a time but now revealed. The one sent to win people back to God. To see this is to comprehend the entire purpose of John's preaching.

From the moment John revealed what he saw at Jesus' Baptism the knowledge was no longer his possession, something he could use to enhance his personal spirituality. It reverberated beyond his control and began to have an effect in the world, one aspect of which was his disciples transferred to another teacher. No doubt this was hard for John, but it was not an unintended consequence of his work. Those of John's hearers who truly understood his witness had only one alternative: to put their trust in the one

to whom he pointed.

We know that in Luke and Matthew something is made of the family links between Jesus and John. But an interesting thing here is that the Baptist twice says: "I did not know him". The Baptist's insight into the deeper meaning of Jesus' life was not because he came from the same family, or because he was especially clever. It was a gift of God, granted through the illuminating power of the Spirit. This was grace: pure gift. And it introduced a new agenda for living, one set by the pattern of this life and expressed by the community, which formed in response to his ministry and message. This is what it means for God to win Israel back through the work of the servant. It meant there would be recreated a community of shalom which lived in honour of God

Just how deep this runs can be found in unpacking what John said when he pointed to Jesus and said: *here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. There are rich and complex associations with this image - the Passover Lamb of the Exodus, the Lamb of sacrifice that was given to Abraham to fill the place meant for Isaac, the Jewish daily sacrifice at the Temple. But none of these took away sins. This is a case where the foundational symbolism is drawn from an older tradition, but is transformed into something new, especially in connection with the Lamb who *takes away the sin of the world*.

One of the struggles in reading the fourth Gospel is that its imagery is rich and comprehensive, and does not proceed according to logic that builds from one piece to another. That is why it is probably the case that here, long before the Last Supper and Easter, two thoughts are combined to offer us a Paschal interpretation of the Eucharist. Christ was the Passover Lamb: the agent of God's freedom. And Christ took away the sins of the world: his power came from the source of all things, and was strong enough to transcend every barrier that keeps us from the life God wishes for all people.

That the fourth Gospel says this first, in connection with Jesus' Baptism, is significant, and it deepens our understanding of what it meant. Jesus' Baptism is a metaphor for his total entering into life with us, even to the point of penetrating death. The Spirit's embrace meant that the power in which he lived enabled him to demonstrate there are no realms of terror that lie beyond the sovereignty that led his life. His emergence from the waters of Baptism can be compared with his resurrection, and is a declaration that those who live in God live and torturers will not triumph over the lives of their victims. The forgiveness of sins simply means that, God has continued to search for us and a relationship, which had become damaged or lost, has been restored. The agent of this accomplishment is not a weapon of offence, a sword or polished arrow as in Isaiah. But it is specific. It is divine creative energy, expressed as suffering love, fully present in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the one in whom God has looked at us and seen us as we really are, and then gives us what God wants us to have. Love that is strong enough to suffer with us and show us there is a power greater than death. Love that is both precise, and yet ranges as widely as possible to show us that above and beyond all our faults we are cared for in a way almost too deep to understand.

This is God's gift to us, a gift beyond measure. With this in view our search is over.

However, what does follow is discipleship: a commitment to learn and live in the way that comes from Jesus Christ. It means a willingness to live in the Spirit that lived in him. This may actually mean we will have to leave our old teachers, but in the end this will be no loss, for what is on offer is the chance to be part of a community that learns and lives the way of peace. To God be the glory. Amen.