

Lent 2
17/02/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 12:1 – 4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1 – 5, 13 - 17
Matthew John 3:1 – 17

New possibilities of life for us

This week, in the lead up to the opening of Parliament, the 7.30 Report interviewed a panel of Aboriginal leaders concerning the Apology. In conclusion Kerry O'Brien asked what they thought this would mean for Indigenous people. Magistrate Sue Gordon said: "There will be new possibilities of life for us".

"New possibilities of life" is a theme that runs through the texts for today. For Abraham and Sarah, the call of God came against a backdrop of the betrayal, murder and self-indulgence that ends with the breakdown of community life shown in Genesis 11. They themselves were aged and barren, with no hope for any kind of meaningful future. Abraham and Sarah were aged 75 when they were called. Al Macrae said this is slightly more than the average age of people in the Uniting Church! Seriously, we should pay close attention to the fact that, at such a stage, Abraham and Sarah embarked on a new adventure, which completely redesigned their identity and place in the world. They relinquished all that was familiar and embraced an entirely new possibility of life. They went forward, placing at the centre of their lives a presence and purpose not their own. They became archetypes and pioneers of what it means to live, trusting God.

In their readiness to journey like this, Abraham and Sarah became a family of hope, not for themselves, but for all the families of earth. They became a living sign of what it means to risk what is in hand for the promise of better things to come, even when nothing of the sort can be seen. That is why the journey of Abraham and Sarah is an event of world significance. They are a living demonstration that God overrules the powers that seek to destroy hope, through trustful, obedient attention to the promise of new life, rather than through military might, or shocking force.

Abraham and Sarah were the beneficiaries of the call, but they were not in control of it. They went forward to live according to an agenda set by another and co-operated with God's desire to unleash the power of blessing into a world scarred by dehumanisation and death. It might not seem like it, but they chose the winning side. What looked like death, a call to relinquish everything, became life. In the moment of call a dimension of possibility and presence entered the life of the world that can never be dispelled by ruthless power, or flattened by weasel language, or immobilized by ideology. The gift given here cannot be conquered by our despair, or pre-empted by our ingenuity. It is God's promise, made present and kept for us by God's power.

The essence of Paul's reference to this event in Abraham and Sarah's life is to say they are not involved in any equal exchange of work or power with God. They became the Spiritual ancestors of all believers because, when God graciously became

present to them, they allowed themselves to receive the gift and live in it.

It was not so with Nicodemus, a knowledgeable teacher in Israel who had enough discernment to recognize the source of power behind the actions in Jesus' ministry could only be the radical, life-giving presence of God. It had "come down" to be with him. What Jesus said to Nicodemus is that the clue to accessing this life is to live in openness to the Spirit of God as he was doing. This openness involved complete surrender to the Spirit, which reached its clearest expression in his being lifted up in death and resurrection to become the new sign of God's faithful, healing and reconciling presence in the world. Jesus supersedes the serpent Moses lifted in the wilderness. Those who look on him will find new life.

Challenged to yield and be "born anew from above" Nicodemus stumbled. Unlike Abraham and Sarah, he was unable to integrate what he heard. Although a teacher of the faith, his life was driven only by human possibilities and he was unable give himself to live in vulnerability towards God. Not for him a new journey of trust. Having come in the dark he remained in the dark. But we need not if we are willing to receive the gift, which brings new possibilities of life for us.

There is a link with the events of this week. Many hearts rose in joy as Wednesday 13 February unfolded. Although a secular event, the communal and reconciling nature of the Apology had theological and liturgical overtones. The event demonstrated that something more than mere phraseology was here, as Bonhoeffer would say.

Many have said we don't have to apologize for things our ancestors did. But we could not agree with that, for we are heirs to the collective understanding of life of the Hebrews, who still say they were in the loins of their ancestors who walked through the Red Sea to freedom. If we have any sense of connection with that perspective, it is reasonable to say that in some strange way we were part of the suffering caused by our ancestors, and justice calls for us to own up, and set the scene for a new kind of future. And as Christians we believe the Holy Spirit puts into effect the forgiveness and reconciliation offered to the world in Jesus Christ. Therefore in faith we look on this as sign of the freedom and new life that is consistent with the Kingdom. There have been intransigent sceptics who stood aside from this event. But this shift in our culture means now we live with an injection of hope we did not have before. Hope, which promises a new level of healing and reconciliation for all Australians.

Realistically, there are many challenges ahead. But the changes that have occurred since last November include the abandonment of the Pacific Solution, which gives rise to the hope that new possibilities of life might also emerge for Asylum Seekers. This contrasts sharply with the tone and colour of the previous decade. A new vision seems to be taking shape. The Prime Minister is calling for 1000 of Australia's "brightest and best" (*Age* 4 Feb) to gather in April to contribute to a special Summit aimed at developing proposals to tackle 10 key areas of life, through to 2020. Meanwhile the latest edition of the Griffith Review has emerged, dedicated entirely to the theme: "Re-Imagining Australia".

There is new energy at work here and anyone who cares about what sort of big picture we live by in Australia can't help but feel excited and hopeful at these trends. And as

a community of faith, gathered in the season of penitence, preparing to celebrate God's radical, unexpected gift of new life in Christ, we ask: what does this mean for our life together, and how might the things we value and treasure contribute to the renewal of life in this land?

The church may or may not be given the opportunity to make a direct contribution to re-imagining Australia. But in this moment, and the days that lie ahead, it can rely on its long memory and recall how Abraham and Sarah embraced the gift of newness that was offered. This did not mean life was easy. They had to adapt to serious change. But they became a blessing for many. And, thanks to their faithfulness, others came to have access to the hope in which they lived.

The average age of members in the Uniting Church may or may not equal that of Abraham and Sarah, but this is no barrier to us being renewed as a Church, and as community of hope within Australia. Because the stories we listen to here have life at their core. And we know God overrules the powers that seek to destroy hope, through trustful, obedient attention to the promise of new life. That is why even we may become a source of new possibilities of life for others. And that is why we can joyfully celebrate the coming of this gift. Thanks be to God.