

Easter 5
20/04/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 7:51-60
Psalm 31
I Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

Words for troubled hearts: there's a place for us

Jesus' words for troubled hearts are from the farewell discourses in which he talks to the disciples about what their life will be like following his death. The topic evokes confusion and fear among the disciples. But the farewell discourses have been kept and developed as significant dialogues. They sum up the meaning of Jesus' life and ministry and are full of pithy statements that form a rich deposit of teaching for the church to use on its pilgrimage through history.

The first thing Jesus says is: "believe in God, believe in me." This is a call to trust that Jesus fully represents the God in whom they trust. It is as if he says there is a window into heaven, and when you look at it, you will find my face there. Jesus is the Icon in whom the divine light shines for us.

Then Jesus goes on to offer the knowledge that his going to be with God through death is to create "a place for us". There's a place for us. The graphic on the pew sheet has been inspired by Jesus' words: "in my Father's house there are many dwelling places". "Dwelling places" is a concrete way of describing the relationship of indwelling John refers to when he uses the word "abide". In other parts of John Jesus has demonstrated what indwelling God looks like. It was manifest in the healing of the blind man, the feeding of the crowd, his fraternising with women and outcasts and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. He was the living embodiment of God's move towards us in merciful, self-giving, inclusive love, which aimed to draw us into the life for which we were created. There's a place for us: Jesus is God's invitation to "abide/dwell" in God. And furthermore, his going in death, and coming again is a sign that the relationship he offers transcends the realm of death, and is available to us permanently.

The second thing we find here is Jesus' reply to Thomas: "I am the Way the Truth and the Life". This is a confession that there is no difference between the self-giving, inclusive love Jesus embodies, and what God is. That is why Jesus says to Philip: "if you have seen me, you have seen the Father, because the father who dwells in me does his works." Once again this is relational knowledge with relational implications. Those who are "on the Way" are engaged in living out this truth about life they have received from Jesus.

The second part of the text: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life - no one comes to the Father but by me" is one that creates trouble in our day when all claims about truth are seen as relative. What we are apt to forget here is that those who follow the Way give themselves to this truth - but they do not control it or have a monopoly over it. The relationship is the other way round. The truth in which we live shapes us.

Therefore, even though the church takes refuge in God, bears witness to the Kingdom and trusts that it is part of God's reign it cannot with absolute certainty claim that it is the only place where God dwells and is at work. That God is sovereign means the church has to remain open to the thought that God's "Jesus shaped" self-giving love may be present and at work in forces and events we might otherwise dismiss.

The third point is that Jesus says "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." This does not mean God is like an indulgent parent who willy nilly grants all prayers. The crucial element here is "in my name" which links the prayer to the relationship with God through Jesus. "In Jesus' name" means according to the way of the cross: the spirit of self-giving, inclusive love that in Jesus, sought only to bring glory to God, not to gain things for himself. Of course we should place our needs before God in prayer, but to ask "in Jesus' name" means to be ready to receive what pleases the self-giving love of God, rather than our neediness or desires.

"There is a place for us" is a vision God has for the world in Jesus Christ. The way to that place is through a relationship with him, through whom it is possible to seek the deepest satisfaction available. John has passed on Jesus' farewell discourses so that the same fountain of spiritual resource and refuge that comforted the troubled disciples long ago may be of help to us in our time.

Today there are many reasons for having troubled hearts. Recently there has been a raft of very gloomy books and articles about climate change, which are tending to say we have passed the point of no return and that by about 2100 the world will be in a parlous state. The deserts will have expanded, the level of acid in the sea will have killed the reefs and fish, and people will be seriously under pressure for food. Whatever the truth is, it is unlikely the world can sustain what is happening, materially or spiritually. But what if anything, can the Church contribute?

On Friday night the ABC broadcast some music from the Hopi Indians of North America who have articulated the thought that the degradation of the earth is a manifestation of spiritual despair amongst humans. If their insight is true, this suggests a set of meanings governed primarily by greed and consumption is destructive of the world as home to the human community. It can only change if troubled hearts find how to live according to a pattern of hope and meaning that nurtures life. One based on a paradigm of self-giving rather than self-indulgence, that aims to protect, and nurture the world and all its people, rather than exploit and destroy.

This week a visiting missiologist from Europe says that whereas the trend had been for people to have moved from being Christian to post-Christian and secular - not relying on any traditional belief patterns - there is now evidence of a trend that is being called post-secular. People seem to have lived the life driven by non-transcendent meaning, found it wanting and become ready to look again at building blocks once discarded. Evidence of the new trend is that the big magazines like Time and Newsweek, who once would eschew faith related topics, now regularly factor in column space for the discussion of religion.

The 2020 Summit is under way and today we will again pray that:
as our leaders harvest new ideas for the future

*they may lead the nation with a clear vision of a humane,
sustainable and hospitable society
that mirrors the justice of God.*

The Summit is certainly a good idea, but the danger is that without an integrating sense of meaning and purpose – a guiding vision - we are likely to create a house full of strategies, many of them competing with each other, rather than a life giving dwelling place for all. If we want to come closer to developing a view of life that is truly fulfilled and free, the way is to look towards a fundamental trust in the source of life that has demonstrated that it is in the going out of ourselves that lies at the heart of faith that we will truly live.