

Pentecost 4
8/06/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 12:1 - 9
Psalm 33:1 - 12
Romans 4:13 - 25
Matthew 9:9 – 13, 18 - 26

Living before the God who desires mercy not sacrifice.

Whether or not the writer of Matthew's gospel was a tax collector the name Matthew means "gift of God" and is very like another word for "disciple". Matthew: *a disciple by the gift of God*. It is a wonderful thought.

The Gospels make it perfectly clear that the Tax Collector - someone who was deemed unworthy because he fraternised with the occupying power, most likely cheated his clients and was thought to be unholy - subsequently became one of the twelve. The reason for this transformation of life was an encounter with an undeserved gift of God's grace, the acceptance he received from Jesus Christ. In a turnaround as radical as the one we see in Abram, Matthew left his old ways and began a new life.

Why would God make such an undeserved offer? The clue is partly found in the words from Hosea Matthew uses to comment on the criticism of Jesus for fraternizing with tax collectors and sinners: "Go and learn what this text means '*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*'".

'*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*' is often taken to mean God does not care for rituals or religious purity, but looks for merciful deeds from the people of God. Seen only in this way, we would have a perfect excuse for building a huge empire of outreach and social service in the community devoid of any sense of faith or worship. But this does not do justice to the context of Hosea's words or Matthew. Hosea looks for knowledge of God that issues in godly living. Matthew's meaning is that eating with tax collectors and sinners is the living expression of Jesus' faith. Because of his complete oneness with God who is merciful, he embodies God's freely given proactive love towards others. We see this in the forgiveness of sins, his acceptance of tax collectors and sinners, his healing offered without distinction and the gift of life he gives in the latter part of the reading.

The underlying truth is that there is an essential link between the essence of God, and what the people of God become in the world through faith. They do not evolve into a transformed life based on their own strength. It emerges from an encounter. And while the result means leaving the familiar and launching out into the unknown, there is something that is known: this new life involves becoming one with God's desire to bring blessing and life to the world, a desire made clear in the promise to Abram and brought to living expression in Jesus.

Our texts take us into territory that is fundamental to the life of faith. The God encounters Abram and Matthew is the God whose heart is merciful, who desires that

people should have life, and offers it to **all** without distinction or preconditions. This offer continues in the world today through the community of Jesus who respond to the call and actualize God's gift of mercy. In them prayer and work, worship and mission are not set up in opposition to each other: they are two parts of an integrated whole. The reason the community of faith takes an interest in the marginalized and the outsiders is because in worship it learns the mercy of God is all embracing.

One of the exciting and challenging thinkers of the 1960s who understood this was a gay man called William Stringfellow. Although from a modest background he managed to study Law at Yale. He was interested in art and circus, but he became a distinguished lay theologian. When Karl Barth visited the United States in the 1960s, he said that of all people the church should be listening to Stringfellow.

What made Stringfellow the committed, outstanding Christian he came to be was what he heard in the bible. It enabled him to understand the difference between career and vocation. His law degree from Yale could have opened many doors. But as a marginal person himself he went to work amongst the most marginalized: the poor of East Harlem. There he became a legal aid lawyer working with clients who had access to no other help. He did this, not because of a vague proposition that God exists, but because he understood that the power of life the Gospel, as present in Jesus, frees us to be who we are in any context. He lived in the strength of knowing that in Jesus Christ "God has sought us and found us, and offered to take us into God's life." For Stringfellow being addressed by the Gospel did not allow him to cordon off God or religion into a discreet area of life to be visited occasionally. Hearing the Gospel meant to live a life that actualized his understanding of God, offering to others the gifts and blessings God wants us to have. His work in East Harlem was for him a mirror of God's engagement with human anguish – an engagement, which by its very existence offered life to those who had none, and thereby stood as a criticism of the status quo.

There is a pattern of things here. We are called into a new life because of a gracious offer that is made to us. This offer empowers us to live out the gift we have received, which means actualizing its meaning amongst others. We do this, not because of a sense of superiority, but because the truth that moves us is the mercy of God, and we know it reaches out to all. This pattern of things is celebrated in every liturgy. Every time we worship we are invited to be nourished by the life we are given, and called to embody it in the world.

As you know, members of this congregation have been active in seeking more recognition for the plight of the Palestinians, displaced as a result of the establishment of the state of Israel 60 years ago. This is not an attempt to say that the state of Israel should not exist. It is an attempt to live in the spirit of knowing that God's gift to the world in the call of Abram and the incarnation of Jesus Christ is to bless **all** the families of earth.

Barak Obama's first reported speech after gaining the ascendancy in the Presidential race was to declare unflinching commitment to Israel's security. The rhetoric means it will be status quo as far as the suffering of the Palestinians is concerned, and it will probably mean others in the region will suffer too. But a faithful response must take into account how that search for security causes others to suffer. Such a proposal is

seen as offering criticism towards Israel. But Israel's own faith includes imperatives to live justly, to embody mercy and to walk humbly with its God. Calling for acknowledgment of both sides of the equation is a just and faithful call. Living before a merciful God does mean having mercy in our sights, even if that is critical and costly.

Members of Jesus' audience were outraged when they saw mercy in action. But God continues to deal with us as God has done since the call of Abram. By means of grace that seeks to draw all people into life that blesses, renews, and recreates. Thanks be to God for such a great gift. Amen.