

Pentecost 11
27/07/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 29:15 – 28

Psalm 105

Romans 8:26 - 39

Matthew 13:31 – 33, 44 - 52

Trained as a scribe of the Kingdom

Every scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom brings out from their treasure what is new and what is old. These words conclude a series of 8 parables, which teach about the Kingdom of Heaven, beginning with the Parable of the Sower, which Jesus told to the people. The text we have heard is a conversation with the disciples whom he says are privileged to have received what they have seen and heard about the Kingdom. The many kinds of imagery used shows the Kingdom of Heaven is a deep subject, rich in meaning. Chapter 13 of Matthew could be compared with a gem, each facet of which is a picture in itself, none of which exhausts the truth told here, but it is the message that counts not the artistry.

The Kingdom of Heaven is the central theme of Jesus' teaching. Its foundation is the idea of the sovereign rule of God, which God desires to be followed on earth as it is in heaven. The biblical tradition is about how God constantly sends prophets and teachers to help Israel understand the sovereignty of God and give their will to God's ways. In Mark 1:15 Jesus announces that the time has come, the rule of God has come near, and it is time to turn and believe the Good News. This text speaks of an opportunity for life with God that has been graciously offered to us, and there is a sense in which everything else the four Evangelists write is commentary on this text. Their message is that in Jesus we have been given the supreme expression of what it means to live by God's royal rule. He is its embodiment, and there is no difference between the will of God and all that Jesus says and does. In terms of the imagery of today's text Jesus is the tiny seed, planted in the earth that grew to become a great tree of life, roomy enough to embrace a wide variety of birds. He is the leaven, placed in the loaf of the world, the transformative and effective sign of God's presence. He is the treasure of superlative value: one in whom we see a gift more precious than all else. The decision about whether or not this is true for Jesus' audience, or for us, has something to do with the great sorting out that happens in the parable about the great catch of fish.

Have you understood all this? Jesus asked because it is especially given to the disciples to understand mystery of the Kingdom. Understanding is crucial because he earlier made it clear that when the Gospel came to Israel it was like a riddle difficult to comprehend. People saw and heard, but failed to understand. And a troubling mystery came into focus. If Jesus was the embodiment of the rule of God, why did the people of God reject him? And why had the Kingdom not come in all its glory? People of a Jewish heritage were scandalized by the idea of Jesus' cross and resurrection, and the messianic claims being made about them. And why did outsiders begin to gather round Jesus' message, like the birds of every kind who rested in the branches of the Kingdom tree that rose from the seed of his life buried in

the ground?

The world was passing through a transition that was painful for the disciples, and for the traditional people of faith. The message of the Kingdom was a proclamation that a threshold had been crossed and a new future had begun to come into the world. What was the meaning of it, and was it possible to integrate this new development with the old ways? What would it mean to be a *scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom [who] brings out from their treasure what is new and what is old?*

To live with an understanding of the Kingdom means to have a kind of upside down view of how life works in the world. It is to learn from Jesus that the ways of God amongst us are quite different from what we expect, and it takes us to different places. It is a view of life, which sees power expressed in suffering, self-giving love, rather than through human competitiveness, or physical or military might. It envisions community life in which the outsider is embraced, the least are valued and all have their share. And it is a vision in which living by grace is foundational: it knows that life is a gift we did not earn, and its purpose is to be treasured, nurtured and shared. When Bonhoeffer spoke of the church as the “secret centre of the world” he meant that it is the community in the world that has been given this sort of knowledge. In seeking to live by it, the church not only finds itself running counter to what is out there, it actually begins to embody God’s agenda for the world. This is the secret of the church’s life: its agenda is the real stuff.

To be trained for the Kingdom and to be able to bring forth things new and old means to be able to understand this perspective. It means being able to understand the traditions of life that have formed us and yet to live with them in the light of the riddle of the Kingdom. Being able to do that means that what we have access to a resource that constantly opens us up in new ways, because it comes from outside ourselves and has its roots in the deepest thing there is. It comes from the vision of God’s work for us in Jesus Christ through whom God always offers us a new horizon. This is the treasure, buried in the field of the world that has superlative value. This is the pearl of great price for which we search.

The really good news is that we can have this conversation because the sovereign power is for us and has given us what we most want to share. Whether we search for it or stumble across it accidentally, what we long for, and need is present in the world and can be ours.

Because of this Kingdom people are people of hope, for they know the power of life that was in this seed, and how it broke forth anew when least expected. They know the Kingdom will be fulfilled, and that is why it is possible to celebrate with Paul who knew that there is nothing that can separate us from the grace that has given us this gift.

Such hope and optimism as we can know does not come from our confidence in the ability of the human systems that we live amongst – politics, economics, history, theology, human relations, theories of progress or the power of the free market. It comes from knowing that Grace is at work amongst those systems, and will, one day, in God’s good time bear the intended fruit. In the meantime we work with patient hope towards the humanization of the world, in the pattern of Jesus Christ. For the Kingdom is not far from us. It has been made manifest in what we know. We have

seen it in a life was planted like a seed, and sprang up, to become the bread of life for all the world. Thanks be to God.