

Pentecost 26
9/11/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Joshua 24:1 – 3a, 14 - 25

Psalm 78

1 Thessalonians 4:13 - 18

Matthew 25:1 - 13

Living with hearts that are steadfast for God

The events of this week have been hailed as a defining moment in the history of the United States, and it may prove to be a defining moment for the world. Whereas the credit crunch was being heralded as signalling the possible end of the economic world as we have known it, the election of Barak Obama has been read as the possibility of a new day dawning. The best of times and the worst of times, all at once!

But as the President elect prepares to ascend the steps to the White house, he has a tough job ahead of him. The world is in bad shape economically and ecologically and, correspondingly, the social climate is fragile. Ironically there is a connection between the white house, the economy, the ecology, and the world we live in. The Greek word *oikos*: meaning house or dwelling, is the root from which economy and ecology springs. And this is a moment when the survival of the world – our home and dwelling place – depends more than ever on world leadership achieving the sort of household management that understands the finite nature of world resources, and plans wisely in order to sustain life for all.

Recently an analyst said [the costs of]: “The credit crunch is petty when compared with the nature crunch”. (George Monboit, *Guardian Weekly*, 24 October p 20) His argument was that the billions and trillions of dollars expended on trying to put the economic crisis right is a foretaste of what it will be like if we continue to prune the tree of the world’s ecology so hard that it dies. The history of ancient communities such as that of Easter Island and the Maya people of Central America suggests that social catastrophe occurs when, because of continuing competition or a desire for grandiosity, people relentlessly exploit their environment without counting the cost. Our free market values go beyond consumerism to dominate all aspects of life and it is unlikely the world can sustain what is happening, materially or spiritually. Just as our government flooded certain aspects of the money market with funds, so it needs to flood the Murray Darling basin with water. And these are signs there is a need to take whole new look at life.

What the world needs now is love: love for the world, and the world community. Love expressed in an intelligent assessment of our resources, and a commitment to live within our means, for the sake of the whole community. How would it be if we learned to lend and spend only as much as we have or can repay? How would it be if we began to treat the ecosystem in the same way, refusing to demand more of it than it can produce? This would mean changing the underlying understanding of what we mean by growth and development. It would mean thinking thoughts we haven’t had before – a painful challenge but one that may yield us new life.

There is a link between all this and the parable of the Bridesmaids, five of whom took account of their situation and acted wisely to make sure they had the resources for what was facing them and five who did not. This is a very old story that has passed through many hands. Matthew put it on the lips of Jesus because he wanted us to see and hear that a threshold had been crossed and a new future had begun to come into the world. Life can be lived on the basis of this gift, but it takes discipline to get there. The followers of Jesus are called to live in the expectation of Christ amongst us in the power of God as a joyful, sustaining presence.

The wise Bridesmaids set the tone Matthew wants to see picked up in the community of faith: stand ready to celebrate with God in Christ who is certain to come to you. Don't be distracted. Don't allow your religion to distract you into pious unreality. Don't allow the troubles of the world to deter you. The one thing that matters above all is on its way towards you. Make sure you have the resources needed to celebrate with the One who wills a superlative peace for all.

The wise Bridesmaids did not treat as idle words Jesus' promise: "I will be with you to the close of the age". Like the people in Joshua's day they continued to choose God, and that is what Matthew would have us do. He did not leave us this story in order that we might whip up faith in 2008 because Jesus might come soon. It is about being steadfast for God throughout life and allowing this direction to become the framework for our ethics. It means doing all that is necessary to sustain the life of faith so that, as we negotiate all manner of challenges, we do not miss the mark. Matthew wanted a people who stay awake, not only to what is going on in the world, but to watch for the presence of the most precious thing within these events. This does not mean ignoring current problems in our house.

At Easter, when the cracks in the Church got worse, I wrote in the Newsletter about how things cracked open for the followers of Jesus. God was in the cracks. New life emerged unpredictably from a context of death, betrayal and fear. The cracking that occurred created a new community, a new way of seeing life and new wisdom and knowledge that has nourished the souls of many. The cracks we are facing are troubling, costly and awkward but there may be ways in which we shall be caused to discover new and good things in the process that lies ahead of us.

The cracks in the walls here are linked to the cracks in the economy, and the cracks in the weather cycle, all of which unsettles us, and leaves us wondering which way to go. But one thing to notice about the Bible is that when it speaks of disaster it does so to point us to something else. Within the movements of history God is at work. The seeds of a new beginning were planted long ago, in a life lived for others. We are called to choose this strength first and choose to live in its light. The message of the Kingdom is that this is the strength that prevails this is the source of our sustainability. And Christ is not only with us in Spirit and in Truth. Christ blesses and takes with him all who resolutely choose his way. If we feel our lamp is burning low, this is where we will find the oil that will keep it burning. In this strength it will continue to shine, and others may come to live in its light.
