

Pentecost 28
23/11/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Ezekiel 34:11 – 16, 20 - 24

Psalm 100

Ephesians 1:15 - 23

Matthew 25:31 - 46

(Sermon preached by Rev. Duncan Watson)

In the early ecumenical years of the 1940s and 1950s the letter to the Ephesians was one of the most constantly referred to books in the Bible. For instance, in 1956 I bought and read a book on Ephesians published in 1952 and written by John Mackay. John Mackay at the time was the president of Princeton Theological Seminary and prominent in the ecumenical movement. The reading today is one of three passages in Ephesians which were commonly used. It tells of the rule of God in Christ. The author speaks of the "Father of glory" and God's "glorious inheritance" in Christ which is our hope - note the word - to which we are called. Everything is based on God's working in Jesus Christ who rules all things, because he is seated at God's right hand. Now the significance of that phrase, "seated at the right hand of God" may escape us but according to Martin Hengel in his extended research into that sentence "the exaltation of the Crucified One (to the right hand of God) is a unique honour." Jesus Christ possesses the honour and power of God. According to Hengel, this affirmation "belongs to the oldest message" which all missionaries proclaimed in common after the resurrection and it is based on the first verse of Psalm 110 and the teaching and bearing of Jesus himself. It is this testimony to God's kingly rule in Christ that was central to the thought and theology of the 1950s.

Now when John Smith informed me that "Rejoice the Lord is King" would be the final hymn I recalled something from about 1969. At our first ecumenical service at College Church, Parkville, the preacher was Father Bill Dalton of the Jesuit Theological College. The last hymn was "Rejoice the Lord is King" which our hymnbook links to the Ephesians reading today. As we reached the door of the church at the end of the service Father Dalton remarked of the hymn "that's a bit triumphalist." I was rather amused that a Roman Catholic should say this in light of our history but why would he say that?

I think one reason is that between the 1950s and the late 1960s there had been a sea change. It was seen in the theological books that were being written, such as *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, *Secular Christianity*, *The Secular City*, *Honest to God*, and the books about *God is dead*. All the emphasis was on what was called the horizontal, the earthbound. What was called the vertical, the transcendent, fell into the background. For me that transformation was symbolised by the fact that in the 1950s Christian students studied Bonhoeffer's radically Christian "The Cost of Discipleship" but in the later 1960s they were reading his "Letters and Papers from Prison". In this latter book Bonhoeffer mused about "The non-religious interpretation of Biblical terms in a world come of age", a world where we lived "although God was not given" - that last sentence was written in Latin which seems a bit strange in a world come of age.

What Bonhoeffer intended by his musings is open to debate but the secularists certainly used them. Moreover, the emphasis on the vertical or transcendent was submerged and the horizontal emphasis dominated the scene. And of course all this took place against the development in the west of the last two hundred or so years when we began to think it better to be of some earthly use than too heavenly minded.

In such an environment today's reading from Matthew very much suits the times. This parable of the judgement of the nations is the great summing up of what has gone before. There is a judgement of the king between the sheep and the goats. The king commends the sheep because they have come to the help of the king when he was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned. These righteous ones ask when did they help the king and he replies that they helped when they came to answer the needs of the least of the members of the king's family. On the other hand the goats are judged and damned because they did not help the king in the persons of the needy. But, note, those who helped did not know. In other words what they did was uncalculating. They didn't ask, "what's in it for me?" They didn't think about how it might further their cause or the cause of their group.

Now the call for acts of mercy rather than a false piety is central to the concerns of the gospel of Matthew. Undoubtedly we see here God's option for the poor. As I said, that message certainly suits our times but that is a problem. We are then tempted to go along with the times; to follow the stream and not to go against the stream. For one thing, if we simply take the parable as it is and give our attention to doing what it says how do we possibly avoid being conscious about what we are doing - even calculating?

Back in 1970 Jacques Ellul, the many sided French scholar, pointed out how selective we were in practising God's option for the poor. On the whole he claimed we Christians took the side of what he called the "interesting poor", that is, people selected because they were victims from a certain ideological and political perspective, in this case anti-Americanism engendered to a great extent by the Vietnam War. Ellul pointed out how politically uninteresting poor, that is, obscure poor, and poor who were simply on the wrong side were left out. Since then, of course, much has changed with the rise of single issues and single issue politics, with great emphasis on victims of various kinds, but something of the uncalculating nature and scope of what Matthew is speaking in his gospel have been submerged. The causes become everything for some people including Christians; they become earnest and anxious, and at times a Messianic streak emerges. And sometimes, while mercifully judgement on individuals has diminished for the most part, at the same time social and political attitudes of condemnation have multiplied. And of course you could no doubt call on this Matthew parable where the unrighteous are assigned to eternal punishment to justify such verdicts.

But what is Matthew's outlook? What do you make of Jesus' call in chapter five, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"? What of those poor, the tax-collectors and sinners to whom Jesus went, thus infuriating his opponents? And beyond Matthew, what of those Gentiles, non-Jews, barbarians, to whom the early church went with good news? Moreover, what of the scribes and Pharisees who may well have been in mind with the unrighteous of the parable of the sheep and the goats? Has not God reconciled his enemies to himself in Christ? And who is the judge?

According to Paul it is Christ Jesus, who sits at God's right hand and intercedes for us -which is the basis of all intercessory prayer. And what of the Jewish people and those leaders who are so heavily criticised by Matthew? In Ephesians chapter two we hear they are God's people, near to God, and in Romans Paul affirms they are still God's people because God is true to his promise. What I am trying to say is that the scope of God's mercy in Christ is quite beyond us and that is one reason why our imaginations are selective.

So our reading from Ephesians is telling us that the Christ who sits at God's right hand is our only hope and it may be noticed that even in the Matthew parable the king remains Lord. And the word which came to my mind for today was the word "freedom", a key gift of God in Christ. The Catholic Archbishop of Durban, South Africa, Denis Hurley, had as his personal motto the saying of Paul, "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." For me Hurley was an exemplar of that freedom. He was a free man, a courageous and active opponent of apartheid and defender of its victims, yet a person who was self-effacing with a wonderful sense of humour, who never took himself too seriously. He was a true man of God steeped in the worship of the God of Christ, like that other South African bishop Desmond Tutu who could never be accused of being earnest or solemn and who, while he made clear his vigorous "no" to apartheid's supporters, never forgot his basic "yes" to the human being who supported apartheid.

"For freedom Christ has set us free" Paul wrote to the Galatians. Christ through his forgiveness gives us freedom from sin and guilt, and freedom from self and from the limitations of our group, freedom from earnestness and anxiety, freedom to gladly serve, and perhaps above all for today, freedom to hope. That is what the Ephesians reading bids us do - to hope - and in chapter two we hear that before the coming of Christ we were without hope and far off. And because in Christ you and I are given the freedom to hope, we are given the freedom to hope for and serve all God's little ones - the victims, the sick, the hurting, the oppressed, all in need, yes; but also those people and groups we might classify as enemies, the tax collectors and sinners of our times and all those who are seen to menace us and our way of life, quite unlovable people. In your concern for asylum seekers, especially in the xenophobia of some years ago, I believe you manifested the freedom and the hope Christ gives. As for me, like the Church in general, I still do not know what it is to love my enemies - I remember once asking that as a question at a Synod - but I do know that Jesus, the king of glory to whom Ephesians witnesses today, makes me free and all of us free to begin the journey along that road.