

Lent 2
8/3 2009

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 17:1 – 7, 15 – 16

Psalm 22

Romans 4:13 – 25

Mark 8:31 – 38

The holy possession of the cross

In the Museum at New Norcia there is a branding iron that was used to mark the stock belonging to the Mission. It is shaped as a triangle topped by a cross. The brand probably did not affect the goals and vision of the cattle, horses and sheep, but it clearly marked whose they were. And for those with eyes to see, it marked them as belonging to those who work in God's name.

A few years ago I was in a meeting with an executive of *UnitingCare* who said he had just come back from a National Meeting where they had been discussing branding. I made a joke about it but the question is: what sign or brand would the church choose to mark its mission in the world?

In the Gospel today Jesus' rebuke of Peter seems extraordinary: *Get behind me Satan!* Peter, the Rock on which the church will be built is equated with the adversary who, in the Wilderness, tried to distract the Beloved Son from his mission of serving God.

Jesus' robust response to Peter comes about because although earlier he had recognised Jesus as the Messiah, he cannot stomach being told this will mean suffering, rejection, death and mysterious resurrection. Now Messiah was Peter's word. It did not come from Jesus, and his rebuke is taken to mean Peter was thinking in terms of a nationalistic leader who would bring political freedom to the nation and win earthly glory and power.

In rejecting Jesus' teaching about the Messiah, Peter put showed he did not yet understand the ways of God. Peter, *you are setting your mind not on divine things, but human things.* Jesus calls Peter Satan because in the Wilderness Satan put him under extreme pressure to turn from living wholeheartedly for the one who had named him the Beloved Son. Mark does not tell us what happened there, but we could imagine the conversation: "Jesus, 'did God say' you are the Beloved son? Why should you let that affect the way you live? Come with me and you will have the world at your feet." In the Wilderness Jesus kept his mind set on the divine love that had named him. That choice remained embedded in his heart and he came forth to allow it to shape the direction of his life all the way to Calvary.

That is why the cross has become fundamental for Christians. It is a sign of death, but it marks the place where the promise of new life is opened up to us. The cross is a sign of God's choice of us. It is the sign of Jesus' complete self-giving founded on the gift of divine love. And it stands for the victory Jesus won in the desert, and on Calvary. It is a perfect sign of what it means to follow Jesus. No other brand is necessary and all other symbols we choose for our churches are to be measured against the truth of this one.

On Friday night many of us were badly shaken by an earthquake. Had it been stronger, who knows what sort of upheaval it might have caused for the church and us. There are different kinds of upheaval. The Reformation was one that led many to think deeply about what it means to be an authentic church. Martin Luther did some of that work. He stated there were seven tangible signs of a holy people: the preached Word of God, the sacrament of Baptism, the sacrament of the altar, the use of absolution for the forgiveness of sins, the calling and consecrating of ministers, the public use of thanksgiving and prayer, and “*the holy possession of the cross*”.

Luther’s seventh mark *the holy possession of the cross* stands for the presence of suffering in the life of the congregation – the reality of lives lived in the self-giving model of Jesus Christ, through whom the merciful love of God sought, by all means, to draw us back to the place where we will find rest for our souls.

Jesus’ rebuke of Peter is shocking, and it is also salutary. If one so close to the truth can be so far in error, then we must always be open to further reflection on the truth of our own lives. Gordon Lathrop (*Holy People*) says *the holy possession of the cross* is especially present in prayers that admit the real needs of the people, their failures their sufferings, and the sufferings of the world. In confession and intercession, the people throw themselves on God’s mercy, and seek God’s mercy for the world. And we might add, those who have been embraced by merciful love, can do no other than extend that merciful love to others.

The holy possession of the cross calls Christians back to an honest confrontation with our own limitations and pain, as well as the weaknesses and pain of others. One function of liturgy is to keep the individual and collective ego of the people under control by always pointing us back to God. For this reason in a church that lives truthfully there will always be an absence of triumphalism and egoism in worship.

Having begun by showing you the brand from New Norcia, you need have no fear. We are not heating up the irons outside to send everyone home with a sizzling mark on their flesh. Hopefully being here means we have found the grace and strength to face our own frailty and need, and sought the one real antidote there is to the spirit of grandiosity and self-indulgence that permeates our age.

“*The holy possession of the cross*” is the preparedness to follow Jesus and keep our mind on divine things in honesty about ourselves. It allows God to be God. If that is present there is a chance we can meet each other in the spirit of honesty that makes real community possible.

A church that is marked by *the holy possession of the cross* is not ashamed of Jesus. And it will be a church that truly lives for others in his name. Its people will not lose their lives in self-centred pursuits. And there will be no need for branding, for the light of the cross, embedded in their hearts, will shine.
