

Lent 3
15/3/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

Sermon preached by Wes Campbell

There was an earthquake here last week and I missed the entire thing. To say I was sleeping would be stretching the truth – I just missed it!

How would it have been if you missed the earthquake and then, turning up here on Sunday, you found only a pile of rubble.

The loss could be compared with those who had the bush fire demolish their homes and possessions. Maybe worse!

Did you sense the trembling as the Fourth Gospel was read?

A collapse is taking place. The temple is falling.

Jesus speaks. He is both earthquake and temple.

Who, then, felt the shudder as we heard the reading? Are we moved by it? Is there any terror left here? Are we so far from the religious leaders that we ride out every shudder? Or are we asleep?

Ernst Troeltsch, at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, said that the world he lived in was tottering. The whole construction of church, faith and Western civilisation was falling apart.

And, if you look beyond the theological halls, there was Friedrich Nietzsche who declared the death of God, the collapse of the whole religious world of the west, where the churches have become the burial place, tombs of God. .

And this was no mere philosophical play: it produced the carnage of the First World War – that so-called war to end all wars. And from there the totalitarian movements of communism and Nazism, and the second cataclysm, a second World War.

And in the post-war years, a time of re-building, of energetic development, Paul Tillich was moved to preach about the shaking of the foundations.

And we who experienced the optimism of yesterday's children, the dreams of a world free of war and overcoming social ills, confront a world afraid of terror, quaking inwardly about the future that may not yet come. Or, perhaps not; perhaps we sleep.

Listen again to the reading from the Fourth Gospel, and you hear the commentary: the falling stones of the temple and the rebuilding refer to the body of Jesus!

And how easy it would be to slide into a simple Jesus platitude, which lifts our eyes from the collapse.

But, no. The apostle who wrote this Gospel surely knew of the Jewish-Roman wars, the devastation of Jerusalem by the invading Roman armies, quelling the Jewish uprising. Think of Gaza or Lebanon or Iraq, of war-machines tanks and missiles that rain down to pulverise a whole people. This apostle knew well the devastation of spirit for the inhabitants of Jerusalem at the laying waste of their temple. (Think again, if you can, how it would have been for these cracks in the wall to open up and have the church keel over.) Imagine then the armies and armoured vehicles surrounding and battering it to dust.

That is what Jesus is associated with here. The utter devastation of this thing of beauty, the monument to God's holiness – laid waste. And Jesus is identified with it. All the hearers can register is that he predicts the destruction, the dismantling, the annihilation.

When people are grieving they become deaf in a way. The grief so deadens the heart that the ears are blocked. Can it be that the people of Jerusalem are like this? Are we, after so much 'shaking of our world', also deafened by grief?

Attempting to cut through this is the simple commentary – that the listeners thought Jesus was talking of the temple, but he was speaking about his own body.

Lent is a dangerous season.

It makes us think outrageous thoughts. It hints at the dismantling of everything we treasure. And in its place, at the heart of all we name holy, precious and prized, is the body of a crucified man; a body that should lie down in the dust and decompose; a body that will breathe again with new life.

We are daily assailed with news that makes it hard to live. Any new report conspires to tell us that all is in chaos. But the Gospel we have read tells that there is a special kind of chaos that springs from this man in Jerusalem.

In the early years of this century, following the disastrous destruction of the first world war, a preacher (Karl Barth) declared that the news of Jesus himself was to be compared to a bomb exploding. He was the cause of the tottering, the shaking of foundations we thought were secure.

In a world where human beings build temples: go out the front door of this church and look south east and you see the temples – towers of commerce, reaching in the sky. We are told by economic commentators that we live in times of economic crisis. The debts incurred, the failure of banks, and all that, is daily fare. It touches our feelings of security. And that is just the point: it makes us shake because of where our security lies. The failure of the temples of wealth make us insecure. (But not half so insecure as those people in Manila or India or Dafur and Zimbabwe who live on the edge of starvation every day.)

Here the figure of Jesus poses something entirely foreign.

The apostle Paul in his heated correspondence with the congregation in Corinth hammers home the point. He tells his people that they are gathered to listen together and to eat together with the figure of the crucified Jesus always before them.

He uncovers what we have already noticed today: we are lured by power and wisdom; we expect to succeed by fostering enough intelligence, and by amassing enough economic and military power. But what we are given when we come here is a message about a stupid death, and weak and distorted figure nailed to wood.

Now, you have spent long enough in church to know the formulae here. Enough to be shielded from is shuddering of all that we hold; enough to have worked out some intellectual deal.

In Lent, however, the word is not merely about Jesus; it is also about the congregation who gathers in his name. And here Paul becomes almost incoherent.

He is stretching language, just as the greatest poets do, to speak of what is alien to us, and causes everything to totter. But he is not just playing with words when he says:

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

Nor is he playing with the congregation when he says:

‘Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;’

Here the activity of God is in the world. But that is too inane, too calm, too placid. Here Paul offers the congregation who listens, a massive upheaval.

‘God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are...’

We are living through a great upheaval. The Western church has lost its status and power. Even our great theological wisdom, that has inspired so much great literature and art, not to mention science, is in dissolution. Where shall we look for our survival? Shall we try to reclaim our glory days?

‘God chose what is low and despised in the world’: a congregation! Then of slaves, and poor and women, none so noble, few with great access to political power. Here ‘God chose what is low and despised in the world’;
‘God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.’
‘God chose what is nothing, to reduce to nothing the things that are.’

No wonder Paul is regarded as difficult! But, here, not because of the difficult sentences – much more because he is telling us that it is God stripping away those things we thought were our securities. In order that in Jesus Christ crucified we might see the suffering God, the wounded god, that wisdom and power which is found in the one who refused to protect himself. And, so it is, that all our old notions of a mighty God have to go, to die; and all our aspirations to great power are to be washed away. All our notions of the church as a dominant power (even for good) are now to be replaced by a fragile, wounded people who break bread and eat together.

And, doing that, remind each other that the figure of Jesus whose body lives, will also call his friends and followers to go the path he has, and as his witnesses be ready to die for him.

And to him whose body is the temple of God, who bears the weakness and stupidity of God into our world, and with it great upheaval, that the world might have life and that abundantly, Jesus Christ, be all praise and thanks, honour and glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN