

Lent 4
22/3/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Numbers 21:4 – 9

Psalm 107

Ephesians 2:1 - 10

John 3:14 - 21

Salvation: being on the way with Jesus and his cross

A recurring theme in Mark is that the disciples don't understand what Jesus is really on about or what it means to follow him. In John it is the traditional believers who are always at odds with him. We see this in today's gospel, which is part of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel who came to him at night. He was in the dark in more than one sense. Jesus suggests Nicodemus will not understand unless he is born again/born of the Spirit. He asks: "How can these things be?" Jesus replies there are two sorts of knowledge: the knowledge that comes "from above" - which he brings, and knowledge "from below" to which we all have access.

Jesus said: *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up....* The words "lifted up" are ambiguous. Nicodemus probably would have missed the sense conveyed of "from above". He would not have grasped that it was the power of God at work for us that saved, rather than the image of the bronze serpent itself.

To understand the story of the Moses and the bronze serpent we have to look beyond the primitive magical sense it conveys and remember it sits with stories of freedom from slavery and gifts of bread, water and meat received in the wilderness. These stories witness to one who provides for the people's needs and who longs for relationship with them, even when they become impatient, forget whose they are or what they are called to be in the world. Jesus' reference to the fiery serpent is little more than a footnote, but it opens us up to all of these themes and we have to gain access to these reference points if we want to understand the witness of this story.

When as Christians we want to say something about how God deals with us, we add the figure of another person, and another layer of meaning to what is already in place. The ongoing saga of Israel's journey with God leads to the creation of the church, which holds in its storehouse of wisdom, accumulated stories with multiple levels of meaning, and ever increasing depth.

In John Chapter 12 Jesus' says: "*I, if I am lifted up will draw all people to myself.*" "Lifted up", witnesses that through one of us who lived to the death for God, a sign of death became a sign of life. The same ambiguity is present in the weird and threatening symbol of the bronze serpent. It is an expression of God who is rich in mercy, reaching out to the people as they journey towards understanding, repentance and reconciliation. The people are challenged to look at a symbol of death, and see beyond it to God the giver of life.

The weird and distasteful symbols of snakes and crosses are associated with John 3:16 – “*For God so loved the world...*” the verse Luther called “the Gospel in miniature”. God’s love for the world is expressed everywhere in scripture, but it is John who names it: agape. It is one his most important concepts. And here he amplifies the idea when he says that in love God reached out to us desiring life for the world, rather than condemnation. This is not wishy-washy stuff. John is not saying the world is a good place and we can stop worrying. For him it is still populated by fiery serpents. It is a dark place that lives over against God, a place of death. And yet this is the very place in which the light of God’s love has shone, in Jesus Christ. That is why John regards Jesus as determinative: he becomes the measure of all things. To be saved is to live in the light that comes from him: the light “from above”. This translates into meaning that all who do so have entered the story with Jesus, and begun to travel the road with him and his cross. It means we have become part of the community that begins its life, as we do every Lent, knowing that he has broken the power of the snake - the power self-absorption and the struggle to take the place of God. He is the one who shows us what it means to live “from above”. And the Gospel is that we do not have to toil to find the way to live according to God’s truth about life. The way has come to us. In word and deed it has called us to rise up and live freely on the basis of what God has done for us.

This idea seemed like a threat to Nicodemus. It is possible his experience of God’s love seemed to condemn his efforts. The word of life sounded like a word of death to him. And so it is for many, which is perhaps why Blake wrote:

*That vision of Christ, which thou dost see
Is my vision’s greatest enemy.*

In the tradition of the Church today is a Sunday of respite on which we momentarily relax our grip on the austerities of Lenten discipline. The reason for this relaxation is supported by the texts for the day, which point us in the direction of concentrating on what God has done for us rather than on what we must do for God.

And as we put up our feet a bit, a word of caution: the love of God who is rich in mercy does not come instead of or without the cross. The richness of mercy that came to the people of old included the invitation to forgo trusting in their own efforts, and to live out their calling according to the God given light that shines from this ambiguous sign.

The unmistakable challenge is that we are asked to make a choice about Jesus and his cross. The thing that makes it such a challenge is this: the new life that comes to us through it cannot be anticipated. We will not have more new life if we develop a superior ability to bear the cross. New life is given not achieved. For this reason, and in the deepest possible way the cross challenges everything because it calls us to make a choice about whose we are, whom we will trust with our life and what we are called to be. Whether the cross will be our enemy or our friend will depend on this: whether we opt for life in which we have control. Or whether we will trust God who in Christ seeks to gift us with profound acceptance, deep relatedness and entirely unexpected newness of life.
