

Easter 5
10/5/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 8:26 - 40
Psalm 22:22 - 31
1 John 4:7 - 21
John 15:1 – 8

The vine and the branches: dwelling in the unlimited sovereignty of God

The Easter Season is the only time of the year when the traditional first reading from the Old Testament is replaced by readings from the book of Acts. Normally the prophetic and historical readings set the contours for our understanding of faith and act as a back of stage light for the figure of Jesus. But when we change to Acts we enter a world of stories filled with dramatic events associated with preaching in the name of Jesus and deeds and journeys prompted by the Holy Spirit. It is as though we move from the realm of promise to the realm of fulfilment and reality.

Despite the disappearance of the OT reading, the Psalm remains. This week we revisited Psalm 22, normally associated with Jesus' cry from the Cross: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" But the verses we heard are from the second half, which are not a lament but a hymn in praise of God's deliverance from danger and hostility. The sentiments we find here have a wide reach. The Psalmist wants the world to know the unlimited depth and power of the sovereignty of God. We did not sing the final verses of the Psalm today but in them the writer says that *even the dead shall praise God*, and that *generations yet unborn will sing of God's deliverance*. This is big picture imagery that goes beyond the edge of life, and has confidence in the historical continuity of life and faith. One writer said the Psalmist's joy is "infectious". But if we keep in mind that there are two parts to this Psalm, it is possible to see that the back-light to this joyful theme is the experience of deep hurt and tribulation associated with times of devastation and suffering, such as we have known this year in Victoria. Out of a profound experience of life and death the Psalmist found the resources to witness to a faith in God that was as wide ranging as it is possible to be. And there are some associations with the ideas connected with the suffering servant, whom Isaiah said God would vindicate.

There is a direct link between the Psalmist's "unlimited depth and sovereignty of God" and the Acts reading. Sit down for an hour and read the book of Acts and a picture emerges of a church that is confident, energetic, expansive and inclusive. All this is based on the story about Jesus whose death gave rise to an amazing confidence in God's ability to bring forth new life from hopeless situations. The spreading of the apostolic message never loses sight of the cross, but it is not driven by sadness. It is full of confident joy and amazing actions inspired by the promptings of the Holy Spirit - God's life giving, energizing force that is not held back by any of the constraints or divisions we normally allow to control us. Acts develops into a story about the worldwide recognition of God, who was made known through the power that was at work in Jesus. Acts actually tells of our roots. It witnesses to the ongoing life that spread from Jesus: spread like a vine to reach even us today.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian demonstrates the unlimited sovereignty of God. In context, it is preceded by the story of a missionary encounter in Samaria where evil spirits were disturbed and defeated, the power of magic was undone, and Jew and Samaritan were reconciled and joined in faith. The story following is of Paul's conversion, which one writer titles "An enemy becomes a brother." The restless Spirit of God prompted the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. Ethiopians were regarded as exotic inhabitants of the far reaches of the earth. This one who is probably a proselyte is an important, authoritative figure, a Queen's minister. He has lots of power except the power to understand the word of God. Significantly he is reading the section of Isaiah about the Suffering Servant and just as significantly he cannot understand it. In his solitude deep, holy wisdom escapes him. The story of the Spirit's prompting that led to his meeting with Philip is about how it is through community (where two or three are gathered together) that we learn the truth. And that community is as inclusive as it is possible to be because it is born of the unlimited sovereignty of God. The result of the meeting is Baptism: engrafting into Christ through the power of water and the word, and it took place on the road to the desert. An exotic God fearer from the boundaries of the world was embraced in the community of Christ. Acts is full of lively stories about the transformative power that is released when the Good News is shared.

In 1996 a sociologist (Rodney Stark: *The rise of Christianity*, Princeton) wrote an account of the rise of Christianity. He used only the methods of sociology and his conclusions, which he admits are open to challenge, are unconventional. One of his principles is that religious movements grow because their members continue to form new relationships with outsiders. He does not use Holy Spirit language, but we should not disdain the reality of this thought: the church grew through its members contacts. The church did not become a sect, wrapped up in itself. Bridges to the world were kept open, new ones were crossed, the Good News was shared and its transforming power gave birth to Christian communities in places where there had been none. The gift of new life the Apostles received was intentionally passed on and others decided to join. When the Ethiopian's puzzle over the passage from Isaiah was cleared up he said: "What is there to prevent me from being Baptized?"

St Cyril of Alexandria said: *Union with the vine is a union of will and intention. The vine's union with us is a union of love and affection.* That means the choice to be part of this is an act of will on our part, but impetus comes from God's choice to have communion with us, a choice born of God's love and affection for the world. All life in the Christian community arises from this love: it is the enabling power behind any impact the Christian community makes on the world. As John describes it, we have no mission of our own. Mission arises from sharing in what God has done and is doing in the world through the Spirit. We participate by choosing to receive the gift of Christ and dwell within the movement inspired by the life-giving intimacy Christ shares with God. But, as the letter of John says, it makes no difference, and is proven false, if this gift does not take shape in our lives, in word and deed. When the life of the vine flows in us, it is inevitable that love: the lively force of the Good News will be seen and heard by others. If that happens there will be fruit. Others will embrace the transforming power of love. New forms of community will arise a sure sign the true vine has branches here.
