

Pentecost 15
13/9/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Proverbs 1:1-20

Psalm 19

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

Who is Jesus, and what does it mean to follow him?

Who is Jesus? And what does it mean to follow him? These two questions lie at the heart of the Gospel, and they are precisely the questions for a day when we celebrate the sacrament of Baptism.

Who is Jesus? In the conversation with the disciples Peter gets it right, naming Jesus as the Messiah - the holy one of God. But when Jesus says his life will be shaped by the cross, which can only mean one thing, Peter vehemently objects and earns Jesus' stern rebuke. Peter's problem is he can't imagine a Messiah who would suffer and die: this is strange and hostile teaching, and these words amount to a dangerous memory. The normal expectations of a Messiah were shaped the political realities of life, dominated by power and prestige. The dramatic silencing of Peter happens because his challenge to Jesus shows he completely misunderstands what Jesus is saying and doing, and his words have the potential to derail his mission. The scene is not unlike the Temptations. Peter was not called Satan for nothing!

Peter's resistance to the cross marks the point where the nub of the issue emerges. The choice is between a life lived for God, regardless of cost, or a life lived according to human standards and human will. What is made very clear is there is a real difference between the way human wisdom and expectations work, and the way God works: God's thoughts are not our thoughts. The challenge is to live according to the wisdom of God, allowing ourselves to be centred in something deeper than our innate wisdom and the meanings we have constructed. But there is a cost. John Henry Newman said: "It is the rule of God's providence that we should succeed by failure." This is what Peter resisted. His preference was for the well-trusted way of power, rather than the way of self-giving.

From this point in Mark's Gospel Jesus is heading for Jerusalem and all that means. If the 12 are to go with him, they too must take up their cross and share the consequences of living for God, to the point of challenging the privilege and power of the church and the state, with inevitable consequences. We know Mark wants us to see this because he bookends the narrative that holds today's reading with stories of healing the blind.

This is a powerful text for a Baptism, because there is a real sense in which, when Benjamin James leaves here today, he will have been branded with the sign of the cross and initiated into a life shaped by its reality. And we will have promised to help him grow into the way of Christ. This sounds serious stuff, and it is. But we began with the Hymn “*Sing to God, with joy and gladness...*” in order to celebrate how we got here. We begin with the gift of grace and life. The God of the scriptures establishes a gracious, nourishing, inclusive community that becomes the source of this empowering story, the inspiration for living a Gospel life. Martin Luther said Baptism is a once in a once-and-for-all sacrament, which takes a whole life to finish. Christians aren’t born, they are made, through life in community with others, who give themselves over and over again to listen to the call of the Gospel, and live it out in the world in the strength of God’s grace. To embark on this journey means being prepared to learn how to let the centre of life be replaced by something other than the self and the ideas of reality we normally follow. This is a tall order. The Christian people have always heard the summons to take up the cross as a call to be converted at the deepest level. And a conversion of this magnitude can be spoken of as death because it means forsaking the sort of ambitions we are used to fostering and being willing to entrust the course of our life to another. This trust does not mean using the cross for self-serving or destructive purposes. Nor does it mean accepting a false pattern of submission - a stoic or fatalistic approach to life, which accepts poor health or deprived moral or social circumstances as part of the will of God. It means actively working for life from a different perspective, born of confidently trusting in the deepest thing.

Who is Jesus, and what does it mean to follow him? We know well how the giants of the faith answered this question. In our time Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr demonstrated what it meant to live in the costly grace pointed to here. They learned what it meant to follow the man for others. Who knows how Benjamin James will choose to live out his life with the cross. But this calling is not only for the giants and martyrs of the faith. The call to choose to live by costly grace and follow Christ into the world is for families, for friends and partners who wrestle with life and all its difficulties, and it is for church communities that ponder what a faith-full life is in this complex world we inhabit.

The Gospel, and the sacrament of Baptism challenge us to find our life by anchoring our confidence beyond ourselves in God. This is not the normal approach to reality, but the promise is, this is the way to life. To take up our cross and follow Jesus is to lay hold of the richest thing of all. If this is true, what can person give to gain such a thing? What greater achievement could there be?
