

Pentecost 17
27/9/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

Psalm 124

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

Two enduring problems: closed ranks and broken bonds

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

What do we make of the Gospel today? Last Sunday was comparatively simple. It offered us once again its familiar pattern of two contrasting figures – those of defaulting disciples, followed by their corrective model for true discipleship - a child. The same contrasting characters are before us today, though with some vivid imagery - one unreliable disciple as spokesman for them all, and again as his foil, those whom the text calls defenceless ‘little ones’.

This simply underlines how unrelenting is the Gospel of Mark in portraying the blindness of Jesus’ disciples. Perhaps it is for this very reason that before the ink of the last contribution to the New Testament was dry, this gospel became something of an embarrassment in the Church. At the very least, its cutting edge was soon blunted; its anguish prematurely calmed; its starkness softened to deflect us from having to deal with its insistent question: ‘Who is truly a disciple?’ and ‘What can disciples expect?’

So in again posing this question today, the passage has to deal with problems on two fronts – first, the disciples’ disconcerting discovery of genuine mission occurring outside their own formal ranks, and then, second, a warning against the sort of internal betrayal which destroys discipleship and breaks community solidarity.

Regarding the first problem, we find today that the culprit this time is not Peter as it was two weeks ago at Caesarea Philippi, but John. In an attempt to erect boundaries around the exercise of compassionate ministry in Jesus’ name, John complains of the activity of a maverick exorcist:

‘Teacher, we saw a man who was driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop, because he doesn’t belong to our group’.

There we have it. John’s censure is based on the fact that the stranger ‘was not following us’. It is clear what is going on here. The disciples don’t want to be followers, they want to be followed. The history of the Church could well stand as testimony to our fascination with the exercise of that self-appointed charter. Called at all times, and in costly ways, to be servants of the gospel, we manage to turn everything upside down, and to put our divided selves at the centre.

Of course, party spirit is hardly a novelty; society in general reveals it to be alive and well everywhere. Regrettably, churches are not immune. A mentor of mine used to say that church union became a problem the moment Jesus called his second disciple. Perhaps even when he called the first?

In past centuries, this party spirit showed itself as antagonism between denominations. Anybody over 60 will know what I mean – the jeering taunts of ‘Catholic dogs’ and ‘Protestant frogs’. Today, as a quick read of Crosslight reveals, it is not so much the institutional denominations that stand over against one another, but the factions within denominations: self styled conservatives, progressives, liberals, fundamentalists, charismatics, social justice exponents – we know the list.

‘Teacher, we saw a man who was driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop because he doesn’t belong to our group’

So we stand again before that hardest of all lessons: that if we want to think properly about the Church we will have to think first of all about Jesus himself.

This means that we will stand again under the promise of the Lord that the Church can only share in the gospel if we resist party spirit, and that there is nothing as a church that we can demand for ourselves or possess for ourselves. To ‘exclusive brethren’, whether understood literally or figuratively, Jesus demonstrates that the quickest way to undermine aspirations to social control is to keep the definitions of belonging ultimately fluid and inclusive.

But now there is this second problem, the breaking of solidarity from the inside through deserting the way, or rejecting the message of the kingdom – a defaulting that the text refers to as ‘to scandalize’. Much more serious than restricting responsibility for the truth of the gospel only to insiders is the occurrence of massive stumbling blocks within the community itself. It is clear from our text that apostasy, or rejection of the faith, has a long history from the very beginning, in this case, arising from external persecution that was causing some members of the church not only to defect from the faith, but also to betray other members.

There was a time when such defection could only be read by us as something belonging to a distant history of the early church. But increasingly there are danger signals that this text might soon have a much more contemporary application than we might previously have thought. We need no reminder that apathy is giving way to increasing hostility if not outright hatred of the faith. Catherine Deveny might have a pathology that sticks out a mile, but she is not alone.

In any case, for Mark’s community the question is: ‘How is this fracturing of the Christian community to be handled? Its resolution is Mark’s brief. In graphic images, he tackles it by offering three parallel penalties – by advocating respectively the removal of eye, hand, and foot.

Of course, on any reading, these verses are difficult for us. The amputation of limbs, or the removal of an eye, obviously sound extreme - if not repugnant - to more squeamish generations down through the years. But the truth is that, in the first century, and still today in some Muslim communities, amputation of the offending member is in fact a *liberalizing* of punishment for capital offenses. That is to say: where punishment is to be meted out, better to lose only a part of the body than the radical alternative of an entire life!

The astonishing conclusion, however, is that, in drawing images from everyday secular administration of justice, the gospel is advocating similar leniency, not strictness, in maintaining the health of the whole body. We can be confident that these extreme penalties were best understood metaphorically, but the real point is that in seeking the health of the whole community, they called for the expulsion, not the execution, of the betrayer.

Finally, two further pieces in this complicated jigsaw help us to understand the allusions of the passage, drawing as they do on the images of salt and fire as remedies. First, it is useful to know that in the practice of medicine of the day, salt and fire were used to close amputation wounds. Drastic severance of eye, hand and foot obviously required prompt and decisive healing agents, or death would not be far removed. When we know this, then the whole passage surely looks quite different. 'Everyone will be salted with fire' we hear. That's the remedy for amputated limbs. That's the remedy for apostasy.

But salt has another function in all this too. It is a healing remedy in a deeper sense. The injunction: 'have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another', is a recalling of the fact that in the Old Testament, salt is a symbol of the covenant. To share salt with others means really to share fellowship with them.

But such fellowship is not a cheap togetherness. The point is that whatever we make of today's text, one thing is clear. Faith matters. Getting it right matters. Battle imagery – amputations, fire, salt are a permanent scenario. We used to sing 'Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war like a mighty army moves the Church of God.' We don't want to sing this sort of thing anymore for obvious reasons. But there is a loss. Christian faith is not a life of cheap grace. It comes at a cost. There is a destiny at stake.

We began with the observation that the Gospel of Mark is counter cultural to engrained expectations about the church. We increasingly need to immerse ourselves in its images for the days ahead. This means in the year of Mark that week after week there will always be bad news and good news. The bad news is this. In short, we are being told that the pursuit of success in mission and life in the Church is never to be taken for granted – indeed, if truth be told, that we are always being set up for failure. Perhaps this is the hardest lesson of all for those of us who were young when success seemed to be something of which our churches could boast. Or we could register the disappointment that the theological and biblical gains of the 1950s and early 60s appears to have so largely failed to capture the imagination of the churches, much less that of a wider society.

That is the bad news. The good news is that there is healing for all who metaphorically might consider themselves to have lost hand and foot and eye. Today we can take comfort in the promise that the salt rubbed into our wounds, though painful, is actually redemptive - not only in the reminder that Jesus said it would be like this, but that he himself lost not simply limbs but the whole of his being.

We meet in a moment around the table of the One of whom death at our hands is literally true. The gospel of Mark truly gets to the heart of the problem. The potential culling of limbs in our case is merely the start of what for him will soon inevitably finish in such a radical deprivation.

Yet the gospel is that we do not have the last word at all. For this dead one is sovereign Lord over our murderous, vindictive hearts, rising triumphant over every divisive fascination we entertain. In place of death he offers life; where we fracture, he heals; whom we are against, he is for.

That is why to this only wise God, our Saviour, we once again dare to ascribe - as is most justly due - all might, majesty, dominion and power, now and forever.
