

All Saints Day
1/11/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 24
Revelation 21:1-6a
John 11:32-44

Sermon preached by Theo Mackaay

In the name of God – Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

I toyed with the idea of calling this “Four healings and a funeral”, but of course John’s Gospel only records three healings unless you include Lazarus being brought back to life. A moot point: this is clearly more than a healing.

So then another option was to put together a title based on the two visions (Isaiah and John of Patmos) bookending the Lazarus story. But that doesn’t really work because the Lazarus piece, at least in some ways, is also a vision.

And that is the point of connection for me across these three portions of Scripture: each offers hope in the goodness and love of God. In each, we can lose ourselves and place ourselves totally at rest in the Divine.

Isaiah talks of a banquet at which all people will be welcome. Patmos Jack (as we might call him in the good old Australian vernacular) holds out a lofty vision of all creation re-newed and the raising of Lazarus points to the fact that even our physical mortality is not beyond redemption.

Lazarus points the way forward, in John’s theology, to that time when death will be overcome. In that sense, it shares the visionary perspective of the other two readings – this is how God will make all things new.

With all this before us, it is clear that we should never be dismayed. Yes, we may share in cares and troubles, and will weep for ourselves and for others when it is appropriate to do so. But ultimately, we are held secure in Divine love.

The issue then becomes to live in that love *now*, and not hold it out as some sort of delayed future. I say that not as an invitation to ignore what is going on in life, or around us, but as a call to see how an incarnate God takes hold of us and shapes us. It is also a call to examine how being at one with Divine love enables us to shape life, community and the world with God.

After all, there is no point in being created in the image of the Divine if we ignore the possibilities and responsibilities placed upon us.

The Lazarus story is fascinating. The Gospel writer, whatever the source of the account, has made his telling of it conform to his theology that the glory of God, in Jesus, is shown in signs and wonders. What’s more, as this is the last of the signs which point to the glory of God, it refers back to the first sign – the wedding at Cana. In both cases, the Divine glory they reveal is highlighted.

"I know that you always hear me", Jesus says, and touches on one of the core theological themes of John's Gospel. Jesus and God are one – it is stated in a number of ways in a number of places. Not many of us would claim the same status – we do not consider ourselves as good as Jesus, perhaps we even harbour a suspicion that we are not as deserving of Divine love as Jesus. But if God incarnate in Jesus the Christ is the pattern for our humanity, then we are.

Paul says, we are in Christ. Our humanity is embedded in Jesus the Christ, and his acceptance of the people *he* met is part of our corporate memory as his Body. We can point to many examples where we, either individually or as the Church, have ignored that part of our humanity, but the lectionary readings keep putting it in front of us.

The Isaiah banquet is welcoming of everybody. Patmos Jack's vision is of the entirety of Creation being re-newed.

This is us, people! Here we find ourselves placed in the story of God's goodness and God's hope for the world. Here we find our purpose. Think of it as concentric circles, if you will, thus -

The Lazarus story points to our response to individual grief and loss. It points us towards being committed to standing alongside people for whom God's love seems to have disappeared. *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* I am not suggesting that you or I can raise the dead – but we can reveal the love of God where others perhaps have lost sight of it.

The glorious banquet pictured by Isaiah finds its way into the theology of the Messianic banquet, an image Jesus also uses. This is something we can foreshadow in our own communities of faith. We do so in the Eucharist. We also do it when we gather together for dinner, or lunch, or supper – those occasions when everyone gets the opportunity to sit down, enjoy each other's company and the food is good, and perhaps the is wine also.

I was talking to a friend during the week, whose Anglican parish this year decided to invite people to join in a roast lunch every second Sunday throughout winter. Community building doesn't get much better than food shared! The same parish used to have a Tuesday evening discussion called "Port and Theology", another opportunity for people to gather over food and drink and discussion.

And in these simple ways we get a glimpse of the banquet which God offers. All it takes is a commitment to bringing people together in the most natural of settings.

Our nation is in the grip of yet another example of our inability to live out that sort of hospitality. There is no good reason why 78 people seeking asylum should pose such a threat to our sense of who we are. There is a beautiful prayer from Michel Quoist from some decades ago where he complains to God about the people to whom he opened his door. There is a sense of being swamped by all those in need. There is no end to the poor, the homeless, the refugees on his doorstep. He ends the prayer with these words:

Don't worry, God says, you have gained all. While people came in to you - I your Father - I - your God, slipped in among them.

It's Jesus welcoming children, it's Jesus healing all those brought to him, it is Jesus showing just how inclusive God's love for humanity is.

It should come as no surprise, then, when I refer to the vision offered by John of Patmos as calling for a commitment to extending our love to the whole created order. The United Church, more than most, has taken up the “*Season Creation*” liturgical material which Norman Habel has been so involved in crafting. A couple of years ago I went to a service based on some of that material. The preacher for the occasion had a simple, but profound theme – “*If we, as human beings, will do whatever it takes to protect that which we love, then it is time we fell in love with Creation again.*”

This is not a time for me to debate a range of environmental issues. However, I was disturbed recently to hear a person in church take the minister to task for promoting a petition about climate change during the announcements. Apparently, that is not a topic for church conversation! More than that, though, I want to point you to seeing and experiencing your place in the created order which God loves and declared good.

So, there are my concentric circles.

Together, they describe the *oikoumene* – the whole inhabited earth as we know it. The readings make clear to us, as we mark All Saints, that God’s concern takes in all there is and sets a stamp of inclusion on it all. As we open ourselves to that truth, we gain an opportunity to find our place in it all – weeping with the sorrowful, weeping with those who join us in the great banquet and having our own tears wiped away as we realise the beauty of what is being accomplished by Divine Love.

There is no guarantee that we will get it right, but perhaps with Thomas Merton, we can pray:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Amen.
