

Pentecost 24
15/11/2009

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 1:4-20

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

The beginning of the birth pangs...

It has been a big week, celebrating 20 years since the Berlin Wall came down. It was an opening that functioned a bit like a birth, for it ushered in a new way of life for many not just in Berlin but in Germany and Europe. And fall of the Wall aroused hope that walls in other places, such as Palestine will one day topple to allow people freedom of life. The fall of the Wall is seen in secular terms, but the unexpected nature of it points to the fact that in political and historical life, we never fully know what might happen. For people of faith, there is here perhaps an inkling of what we think of as grace.

In the first reading Hannah is the centre of a story about the action of grace within the world. In this case grace is God's power of life that worked against barrenness and hopelessness and changed everything for Hannah, and for the people. Her birth pangs brought forth Samuel, who in later life led the people to embrace monarchy under David, who became the archetype of faithful leadership, a prefigurement of the Messiah.

Barrenness, conception and pregnancy were understood entirely differently in Hannah's day. Barrenness was no fault of the woman: it was a decision of God, the giver of life. Nonetheless, the Hebrew commitment to continuity in history meant God's refusal of the gift brought scorn and ostracism to the recipient. Despite the steadfast love of her husband, Hannah lived under a cloud of derision and grief.

Like Sarah before her and other women who followed, Hannah unexpectedly became one of long line of Hebrew women who was gifted with God's grace, which lifted them up from lowliness to have a rich and distinct place in the history of faith. Hannah's story, especially as it is reflected in the Song she sings in the verses following our reading, has similar contours to the story of Mary, whose song the Magnificat, was sung here today.

The pattern is: God works through the lowly and the oppressed. A barren, despised woman is chosen to bear the prophetic leader of the people. Hannah, who was thought to be living at an historical dead end, came to suffer birth pangs - the agonizing and unforgettably painful process of bringing forth new life. Because of her experience, and that of others, birth pangs become a metaphor for the emergence of something greater: a new era of life and grace from God.

The miracle of grace is that it is free. It refuses all efforts by us to be closed off in the world. It does not operate according to our expectations and it will not be harnessed for our purposes or agendas. The biblical witness is that the weakness of God is stronger than human strength, and the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. And this mysterious, upside down sense of power, is a decisive element in all that is visible to us is destruction and lifelessness.

Birth pangs: the Gospel refers to the anguish that accompanies the sense that the Lord's day is near: the future to which all of life is moving under God. This Sunday, and the next two following, these themes appear to colour the readings. We know well how some respond, obsessively trying to decipher the puzzles and symbols found in apocalyptic literature so as to figure out how close we are to the end.

And when we hear these words, about upcoming wars and disasters, it is hard to remain unmoved as we digest our daily bulletins of news, filled as they are with troubling reports of rising sea levels, the extinction of species of flora and fauna, the depletion of the world's energy resources, the pollution of the oceans. We too know of wars and rumours of wars. Nations do rise against nation, people are still starving, natural disasters follow one upon another, even in the same place, while false prophets lead people astray. At a global and personal level, we are no strangers to apocalyptic upheaval and who is there who does not sometimes wonder: how long before we too are engulfed?

In Mark Jesus' speech about such upheaval included the prediction of the destruction of the Temple. For his audience it was an unthinkable possibility with massive symbolic consequences, comparable in our time with the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York. The Temple was a symbol of the nation, a material witness to the presence of God, and a sign of hope for the world. Jesus' prediction was provocative and enigmatic and drew further questions from the disciples, because: if the Temple was destroyed what would become of God?

What we know, which people of the time might only have understood later, is that these events are written back into the Gospel, and form the backdrop for the Passion Narrative, which begins in the next chapter. Mark is very artful. The devastation of Jesus' death, followed by the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem appear in reverse order. By placing the last event first, Mark asks us to look beyond the worst imaginable loss to something even more formidable - Jesus' death. His meaning is that the worst possible material and political loss, is only the beginning, the birth pangs of something new. Through the cross and resurrection of Christ, new life appeared where none was expected, the age to come was present amongst us. For all who can read the signs the power of God is alive in the world and the reign of God is present to us, where we least expect to find it. The cross marks the spot where God's renewing judgement, born of grace and love, is at work for us. The end of the Temple at Jerusalem was unimaginable, but it was not the end of the world. The cross points us to another reality that puts the news of the day into perspective. Wars and rumours of wars will be our experience, as will climate change and financial crises, but they are merely part of the landscape of history in which Christians are called to live. The call is not to be trapped by them but to see past them and stay open to possibilities that are still beyond imagination, and yet are already at work amongst us.

Mark wrote Chapter 13, the “little apocalypse” to encourage his community to remain stable in times of fear and crisis. Placing it as he does before the Passion is his way of directing our attention to the place where God’s presence and God’s power is gifted to us, to lift up the lowly and the downtrodden. In the Passion narrative that follows in Ch 14, Jesus invites us to share the food and drink of his continued presence. In taking in the bread and wine we are linked to his energy and intent and are refreshed by his poured out life. He went forward to deal lovingly and creatively with the things that intimidate our love, arouse our fears, and undermine our faith. Thanks to him, we know a new aeon is even now coming to birth amongst us and hope is possible. With this in mind we can stay focussed, not on what is passing away, but on what is being lifted up to new life. And by grace such as this many who are struggling with disaster, may discover they are in the grip of birth pangs, through which they are being reborn to a lively hope in dark and difficult days. In this strength may we all live.
