

Advent 1
29/11/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-10
I Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

Living and waiting in hope – the Lord is our righteousness

It is Advent again, and our readings highlight themes related to the “end” of the world, catastrophic pictures of the last days. In Advent the end is where the liturgy starts. The point where all seems chaos and destruction is the place where the small flame of hope burns and God is present for us. TS Eliot wrote in “Little Gidding”:
*“What we call the beginning is often the end,
and to make an end is to make a beginning.”*

From amongst the sounds of chaos and disaster, the Gospel, and the prophets, speak, offering us words of a new reality. Advent is the season when we wake up to hope once more, and watch and listen with an even greater intensity for signs of new life that even now may be breaking into our lives.

Two people who probably know a great deal about endings and beginnings; what it means to wait, and the elusiveness of hope are Nigel Brennan and Amanda Lindhout, freed this week after 15 months of being held hostage in Somalia. You may have heard Amanda describe how she was kept isolated in deprived conditions. It was hard to imagine what a discipline it must have been even to get through one more day. There would have been no moment when relaxation was possible. And what was it that kept the thread of hope alive for these two people?

Jeremiah wrote from prison. His world was at war. The city of Jerusalem was under siege. Houses inside the walls had been demolished to strengthen fortifications as the Babylonian army pounded the walls. Food was scarce; death was everywhere. Jeremiah was a pessimist, one who was temperamentally un-inclined to think of the future in positive terms, but in his heart burned a flame of transforming hope that reached beyond everything he and the people faced.

Walter Brueggemann says, [*Redescribing Reality*, 2009, Preface and Ch 1] when the church reads the Bible we open our selves to a compelling voice that offers an alternative view of the world. “The word of the Lord” redescribes the reality of the world in which we live. The word of the Lord is concerned with truth-telling that is not captive to dominant modes of power. These words are not bound by “market ideology”, but witnesses to the one who made all things, and holds everything together with the thread of life. Scripture is a word from the living God, an unencumbered agent of newness, and elusive presence with whom all creatures must come to terms. Once read and heard, the Scripture changes things forever, because from now on the world is not as we thought.

Chapter 33 of Jeremiah is a series of oracles of promise, which offered an entirely new understanding of the future based on “great and hidden things previously not known” (33:3). The prophet announced God’s resolve to overturn the sad fortunes of the people and create a new season of well-being. Jeremiah’s oracles of promise were not a purely inner-thing. They dealt with the life of the city and the future public and social life of community, and this at a time when no future could be imagined. The message was: heaven had resolved that Jerusalem would live again. And this meant the earth would have a future. These ideas were not born of Jeremiah’s pessimistic imagination. These were the words of God who had the power to make the earth and had once more chosen to speak against chaos and darkness. Jeremiah’s compelling oracles of promise were born of his knowledge that God had resolved to be a God of redemption, not destruction. Despite the fact that everything in the surrounding circumstances pointed to a different outcome, Jeremiah’s word was: the promises made long ago would be fulfilled according to God’s will, not according to the actions of human power.

*The days are surely coming says the Lord,
when I will fulfill the promise I made
to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*

*In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David:
and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.*

*In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the
name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”*

(Jeremiah 33:14 - 16)

“The Lord is our righteousness” means God will be and do for the people what they are incapable of being and doing for themselves. God will bring about a massive inversion of circumstances, to the point where the sounds of life and joy will be heard again in the streets. And the nations, who witnessed the coming of dis-order, will see a new social reality emerge on the hills of Jerusalem.

The thing that is striking is this. Jeremiah was not really a monarchy man. He spoke strongly against a wrong-headed sense of privilege that had become attached to Jerusalem, the temple, and the throne. In his eyes royal Israel was sordid and disappointing, and Jerusalem was a place of faithless indifference to the world and others. And yet, God’s will for life in the world includes a person within the family of David who will govern as God intended: practicing justice and righteousness towards all. The sense of the text is that this is not for Jerusalem alone, but will affect all. For us, it reaches forward to hope in Jesus Christ.

There is a strange-ness in Jeremiah’s text. His word breaks into our world to call us to live by a different reality, one that is unencumbered by the troubles and limits of the day. Jeremiah goes a step further: he calls us to live against the limits and encumbrances of the time. The Gospel for today does exactly the same thing. “*Be on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.... Be alert at all time, praying... you will have the strength to stand before the Son of Man.*” [Luke 21:35-6]

The call of Advent is to live life from a different centre: one that is alert to the presence of God – and this regardless of the circumstances we find ourselves in. This call comes to us because the prophetic voices and the people of old understood God is the source of Life who works against death. They carried within themselves this upwelling secret about life, which enabled them, undistracted, to face death and destruction.

On Advent Sunday we are called to live, intentionally seeking God anew each day. We are challenged to be single minded, to cast off the heavy weight of the relentless Christmas rush and focus on the one thing that matters, and then to live in the justice and peace the flows as a consequence.

We don't know how Nigel Brennan and Amanda Lindhout survived their ordeal, but one thing we can be sure of is this: for 15 months they would have had to remain totally focused on the hope that life and freedom would come, even when there was no presenting evidence to suggest it would.

Luke wrote from amongst the chaos and destruction that followed the fall of Jerusalem. When there was little evidence to suggest there would be a church in the next generation, Luke regarded the church as here to stay and urged the faithful not to become slack, or dissipated, or overwhelmed by the cares of the world, but to continue expect the presence of God, to prepare for it, to wait, to watch and to pray.

Luke has grasped something deeper about life in the world. He knew that despite all that happens, the disappointments and disruptions: the promise of God has been revealed to us, and it stands secure. Therefore the proper stance of the church is to live in the sure and certain hope of the coming of God. The rest of the world might think we are mad: but that is what the church is here to do.
