

Advent 2
6/12/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Malachi 3:1 – 4
Philippians 1:3 - 11
Luke 3:1 – 9

A powerful moment in time

Time passes. We know the grandchildren are growing, we are getting older and time seems to be passing more quickly. But occasionally something happens that gives us a deeper perspective on time. For example, when we lose someone we love, in a moment a sudden irretrievable loss allows us to see how all of time has a power and depth to it that we normally don't heed. Any form of catastrophic experience can open us up to such a revelation. Or it might happen when something we have longed for finally arrives – the joy of reaching safety after a dangerous journey, of gaining an award long sought, or being granted citizenship in a new land. Or it may come about because of something totally unexpected such as an inheritance or a gift. In those moments we gain a fresh glimpse of time and see how every moment of our life is actually filled with such depth and power, but we do not notice. The question is: when we catch such a glimpse of time, does our approach to life remain the same, or does this new vision lead to a change of heart?

The second Sunday in Advent is about a powerful moment in time. Luke marks the moment for us: it was the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee... In naming these people Luke locates his story, within the Empire, and the regions, and in context of the current religious leadership. The events he is about to relate took place in real time and space. But Luke did not name this list of powerful people because they caused something. It was because during their term of something unique and significant happened, over which they had no control. At that time: *"The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness, and he went into all the region around Jordan proclaiming a Baptism for the forgiveness of sins."* (Lk 3:2a-3)

The word of the Lord came to John in the Wilderness. There had been no new word from the Lord for hundreds of years. Malachi, who probably lived five centuries before Christ, is regarded as the last of the old prophets. The elusive word of the Lord had remained silent. Now, "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius", the word of the Lord came in an unexpected place. Not the royal palaces, the homes of the governors or in the Vestry of the Temple, but *in the Wilderness*, a place that called to mind the long history of the children of Abraham's relationship with God. When John appeared something was afoot. Things were about to change. It was time to wake up, to straighten things out, to clear the path, and prepare for a renewed relationship with the presence of God.

Although John resisted it, Christian tradition has associated him with the Messenger in Malachi. It has done so because when John appeared it was a signal God had remembered the covenant. Grace was at work moving toward the world to bring radical newness to life. This was good news, and it was terrifying, because the coming of God would cause a complete re-evaluation of life. Among the evangelists Luke stresses John's message of repentance because Grace, the presence of God amongst us, is the highest gift, the most precious thing, and in its presence, all else falls under scrutiny. In that way grace is experienced as wrath; love is experienced as fire. If you have ever worked with someone who has profoundly low self-esteem, you will know how the revelation that they are loved and worthy is a challenging and disorienting thing. The same thing can happen when someone cheats in love, and discovers they are forgiven. John the messenger brings news of salvation that is at the same time a word of judgement. That is why the Evangelists employ Malachi's image of a refiner's fire that burns away the dross, or the fuller's soap, the powerful cleanser used by those who scoured wool in preparation for weaving. The messenger of Grace functions as a purifier, challenging the way we understand the world. His message wakes us up to something of ultimate importance that is moving towards us. This coming exposes everything to new light and causes us to look on life with fresh eyes. Suddenly we can see what is soiled, worthless, and inconsistent with the justice and peace of God in which we are called to live.

When the word of the Lord came to John, it meant the people, who were the Children of Abraham, had to get ready to be renewed and remade in the image of God. They were being called to live out, in fresh ways, the meaning of the covenant God made with them so long ago. The Baptism of Repentance John preached was a call to wash away the rubbish, the dross, and live in conversion of life. It was a call to turn away from all forms of the works of darkness, and focus on the coming of the light that enlightens all humanity. They were called to be what they were meant to be: renewed people of God. On that basis it will be possible for them to offer to God worship that was true and acceptable.

We know powerful moments in time. We may have had one this week:

In the second year of Kevin Rudd's Prime Minister-ship, when Quentin Bryce was Governor General, Wayne Swann was Treasurer, Chris Evans Minister for Immigration. When George Pell was Cardinal Archbishop of Sydney, Phillip Aspinall Primate of the Anglican Church and Al Macrae President of the UCA, then Tony Abbot - known for his forceful views and bullying ways - emerged from the wilderness of the Liberal Party Meeting room to become its leader!

The way Tony Abbot himself judged this moment of time was revealed in his asking for forgiveness for his past sins. It seemed like a moment for fresh start. But how will history judge this moment? Looking back, will we see that from this moment there were signs of renewal of life, signs that the old dross has been purged, and that his words truly indicated a change of heart?

What John the Baptist called for was not more political manoeuvring, more forceful argument or more exacting religious ritual. He called for repentance: an about face that lead to a renewal of life. John asked that the people would turn and truly acknowledge the one who made them and gave them life, and live in the justice and peace he gives. And John makes it clear, even to the children of Abraham, that to ignore his call is to risk being cut off from the gift that is being given.

John the Baptist does not appear on Christmas cards, but he looms large in Advent, to wake us up again to the fact that God has turned towards us, and we must prepare to receive God's renewing presence. John made no discrimination between the members of his audience. To him there was no difference between leaders and people, the doctrinally correct and the morally and ethically inept: all alike were to him a brood of vipers, hoping that when this mad man from the wilderness dunked them in water they would be saved from the flames of a refining fire.

What he asked of them was that they produce deeds worthy of God's gracious covenant with us: that they indeed seek to live in the justice and peace which is God's gift to the world, and be ready to meet God anew in the One who was yet to come: Emmanuel, God with us, Christ the Lord.

John's message revealed that the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius was a very powerful moment in time. That we remember him today makes this moment a powerful moment in time too, for his call is still relevant to us. The question we all have to ponder is: are we ready to receive the rich and gracious gift to which he points us?
