

Christmas Day
25/12/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:7 – 10

Psalm 98

Hebrews 1:1 - 4

John 1:1 - 14

How beautiful are the feet...

When you see a great runner win a race, as in Cathy Freeman or perhaps John Landy, there is a particular quality of freedom in their movement. All their preparation pours out of them as they press on to the finish. Marathon runners say there is a point where they enter into a meditative state in which they are completely integrated and what they are doing seems effortless. The same is true for musicians. There is a point where all the striving is replaced with a sense of being completely at one with oneself in the performance, the music flows, nothing of the composer is blocked out, and the person hardly knows it is happening. In prayer and meditation people experience something similar. Great masters such as Bede Griffiths report entering into a state of prayer to emerge hours later without any sense of the passing of time.

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger. Isaiah's poem radiates with exultation. A messenger is traveling over the hills bringing to forlorn people unbelievable news: their fortunes have been completely reversed. Sixty or seventy years earlier the leading citizens of Jerusalem had been deported to Babylon, their city and Temple wrecked, provoking deep questions about worship and faith in God. Now the time of trial had passed and the approaching messenger was obviously alive with the news.

How beautiful are the feet! Feet are not objectively beautiful. People in all cultures carefully adorn their feet, to bring to this rather unseemly part of the body a sense of attractiveness. We can be certain the feet of Isaiah's messenger were not objectively beautiful. They had been running long distances over the dusty mountains of Persia and the hills of Judea. Their beauty lay in the message they brought, a message of such attractiveness it imbued the runner with a particular star quality, a deep sense of jubilation that was impossible to suppress. The watchmen on the walls became infected with this quality. The remnant living in the broken down city were awakened to take up the jubilant song. A suffering, weary and bewildered people were returning home. Their sense of identity would be restored, and they would no longer be a fragmented people. This was reason enough for jubilation but there was something more to be seen in this event. The messenger's news was "*Your God reigns*". God, whose presence had long been experienced as absent and even negative, had turned towards them once more. The homecoming of the exiles was an event in real time and space that meant divine compassion was at work. God had come home to the people and they were able to come home to their home and to God. Feet moving along a dusty path are a lowly, hidden sign. There was no grand parade, no cortège of dignitaries, but the meaning of this lowly event gave it an inestimable beauty.

John's Gospel sets the scene for Jesus' life within a cosmic scale. There is no debate about whether or not God exists. At the same time there is no foolproof evidence either. Jesus' life had meaning because of where he came from and the life he came to live. Those closest to him said that he provided the clearest clue to God's nature and intentions for humanity and the world. It took several hundred years for Christians to find the words to express what this meant, but sixty years or so after the crucifixion, John's Gospel said: the life in him was the same as brought life at the Creation.

What does this mean in language that might make sense to us today? Rowan Williams wrote: "here is a human life so shot through with the purposes of God, so transparent to the action of God, that people speak of it as God's life, 'translated' to another medium." [*Tokens of Trust*, p57] What is transcendent becomes immediate. Here was a person who was so filled with the inner truth about life: it flowed from him, as if from a runner or a musician, or a person at prayer. There was no recognizable difference between him and the One he represented.

The image of light was a favorite of John. The Early Church picked this up and said when you light the flame of a candle from another: you don't have any less of the first flame, and the second is as bright and hot as the first. [*Tokens of Trust*, p 69].

Christians came to say that in Jesus there is no more and no less of what God is. Jesus is the compassion of God embodied in a life. He is the one who makes God credible through pouring out God's selfless love towards us, and returning to God a truly prayerful life.

When the exiles came home others were caught up in the same jubilation that drove the messenger to them. We are not here today to speculate about God. We are here to catch a fresh glimpse of a compassionate life poured out in prayer and service towards us. And we are here to be caught up in the same deep joy and praise that captured Jesus' heart. We are here so God's coming to dwell with us will saturate us with love, and enable us to know and to live in the deep and lasting joy that is God's gift, to all people.
