

Lent 2
28/2/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35

Sermon preached by Rev. Duncan Watson

Recently I have finished reading a book with the title *Guardian of the light*, a biography of the late Catholic Archbishop Denis Hurley of Durban, South Africa. Amongst many other things it tells of the time in the early 1950s when the Nationalist government decided that all schools subsidised by the government would have to conform to its apartheid policies. Catholic schools, which were so important for the church, would be severely affected. The Catholic bishops were aroused to action and in 1954 Hurley led a delegation of three archbishops and a priest to meet with the then minister of education and later Prime Minister Dr Hendrik Verwoerd. They were led to expect that they would get nowhere with the minister and their expectations were fulfilled. At the end of the meeting we read: “Verwoerd dismissed the delegation as people from overseas coming to tell South Africa how to solve its problems. Hurley replied that there was only one person in the room from overseas – a pointed reminder that Verwoerd had been born in the Netherlands, whereas the whole Catholic delegation was South African.” This biography of the great Archbishop Hurley by Paddy Kearney, both of whom I got to know in my time in Durban especially the latter, has influenced and I hope enhanced my understanding of the reading from Luke which in this season of Lent is seen by the lectionary devisers as an advanced notice of Jesus’ subsequent entry into Jerusalem and crucifixion. In that extract from the biography one may compare the half South African Verwoerd with the half Jew King Herod, whom Jesus called “that fox”. But that is rather facile.

So to go deeper and pursue my intention of bringing together the gospel reading and the modern day discipleship of Denis Hurley let me first note the Luke reading. A few weeks ago at Christmas we were reminded of Jesus’ incarnation, that is, of God’s coming to us, to be with us to create a solidarity with us human beings in our very being and situation. Here was God with us in love, not far off and remote. Last week we were reminded of this by the account of the temptations of Jesus where as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, “we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” – or more boldly as Paul had written of Jesus, “For our sake (God) made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” That is Jesus’ identity with us in our being and situation.

What all this leads to are actions of Jesus, an example of which we see in our reading from Luke today. He approaches Jerusalem and is confronted by the world of politics and religion, of state and church. There is King Herod, the half Jew who is therefore wary and more of any potential claimant of the title king of the Jews. There the Pharisees who appear to be friends but perhaps are just wanting to get Jesus out of the way. There is Jerusalem which as a statistic informs us is central in Luke’s gospel with 90 references to Jerusalem by Luke as opposed to 49 in the rest of the New Testament. Jerusalem is the place towards which Jesus journeys. It is the centre of his world, the centre of politics and religion, the home of the devout, not least among whom are the Sadducees who are the real foes of Jesus.

And there is Jesus who laments over the sins of Jerusalem. He comes proclaiming the kingdom of God. And here before Jerusalem he finds himself, as God's emissary, opposed by the forces of politics and religion. But unlike many of us he is not controlled by them either by simply reacting to them or by succumbing to them – as he says here he will finish his work, that is, he will finish his work in his own time and way, in God's time and way. And he journeys to Jerusalem. He does not stand afar off let alone prophesy from afar as some of us do. Rather like the prophet Amos of old he goes right into the centre of things. He comes with an implied call to repentance, with a word of judgment, yet also with the hope of salvation when he looks forward to the time when people will bless his coming.

The latter day disciple of Jesus Archbishop Hurley found himself confronted by and confronting the state of his own country, and in another area and to his great hurt by the church he loved and served so faithfully. Let me mention just two examples. As a South African white person he grew up in the 1920s and 1930s with the racial prejudices typical of his time. These attitudes could still be seen in his letters home even when he was a seminarian in Rome in the later 1930s. He did not think much of his training in Rome – too scholastic and remote – but he did study two papal encyclicals of 1891 and 1931 whose social teaching challenged, as he was to write later, “in a most striking way... the racial situation in South Africa.” He was to become a great fighter for justice against apartheid, and not just as it affected the church but as an unjust and oppressive system. On one occasion in the early 1980s he led a delegation to what is now the nation of Namibia, then under South African control, to investigate reports of atrocities carried out by a particular group in the South African army. He wrote a devastating report based on the testimony of many witnesses and as a result the government decided to prosecute him for publishing what they called “untrue facts”. Hurley faced court with a quiet determination, and with a defence team well prepared to substantiate the claims of the report. At the last moment in court the prosecution dropped the charges on a technicality but more probably because they knew that once made in court the claims would be widely reported.

I was impressed by what Hurley said immediately after the trial in thanking his legal team. He expressed “the hope and the prayer that the aborted trial may be used by God in hastening the day when the horror of Namibia may come to an end, when the good name of the security forces so grievously tarnished, when the designation of ‘policeman’ so sadly disgraced, will be reinstated and rehabilitated and when freedom and peace will come to a country subjected to the distress and cruelty of war for which unfortunately South Africa is mainly responsible. May God grant the grace of repentance to the offending party and the grace of forgiveness to the offended, that reconciliation may result and peace and friendship come into their own.” Right there in the centre of things is a word of judgement and grace.

Then Hurley had some problems with the church he loved. Worship was absolutely central to his life and from Vatican Council II of the early 1960s in Rome which he considered one of the highlights of his life and to which he contributed considerably he came away with at least two things. They were the concept of collegiality for the church, and a renewed sense of worship in which translations of the liturgy into the vernacular was an aspect. He was one of the founder members of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, was chair of that body from 1975 to 1991 and still contributed after that. In the atmosphere of increasing Vatican authoritarianism during the 1990s, without consultation the Vatican declared that translations from the

Latin should be word for word. This move, as Hurley indicated, offended against the concept of collegiality and contradicted all the best translation principles. As the author of his biography wrote this whole controversy was a most “painful experience” for Hurley. It was not the only difference that Hurley had with those on high. In 1946 at 31 a bishop the youngest in the world, an archbishop at 39, he never became a cardinal although he was the outstanding Catholic bishop in South Africa where others became cardinals. No doubt his doubts about the Vatican’s views on contraception and priestly celibacy, and not least the fact that he continued to discuss the possibility of female priests after the Vatican forbade discussion did not help, as for some his deeply held ecumenical convictions would not have helped.

This very tall, humble, humorous, and evidently very shy man remained in South Africa and loved its rugby. He loved his church and delighted in meeting the various popes. The church and its worship was his life; it was the basis of his opposition to apartheid and all he did in furthering good race relationships. He did what he did where he had been put by God and he followed his Lord who had set his face steadfastly towards Jerusalem. His life was a goodly witness and inspiration to many.

Our lives may not be as dramatic or challenging as Denis Hurley’s but this is where we are, where we have been put as it were, not as that has been sometimes understood to be content with our lot, but to be discontent with our lot as we seek to better things in following our Lord. And today, whatever our lot amidst our own challenges, trials and tribulations, like Hurley we may follow the advice of the psalmist who was assailed by adversaries and foes: “One thing I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.” Christ has promised to be present as we gather; and in Christ as we worship God we find the basis of all our life and activity in God’s world – we learn to travel steadfastly (Luke) and stand firm in the Lord (Philippians) – whatever we may think of the state of politics and church in our nation.
