

Passion Sunday
28/3/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 31

Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 22:14-23:56

Sermon preached by Rev. Robert Gribben

The reading of one of the Passions is a relatively new and still unfamiliar thing in many Uniting Churches. They are always something of a biblical marathon, especially if we read two in Holy Week (as we shall) - and it is a serious question as to why some react against the idea of a marathon as part of our faith journey! Our culture has certainly made us all minimalists.

You have just heard the sermon for today, and from the hands of one of the great Masters, Luke. Let me confess that he is my least favourite evangelist. I miss the rawness of Mark's version: the isolation of his Jesus: betrayed, forsaken, and denied by the disciples, mocked and tortured by his enemies, railed at by the brigands crucified with him, and finally bereft of the presence of his Father. Of course, we have been used to all the different gospels being mixed up together into a kind of Easter soup, bland, universally relevant, timeless. So we have missed the distinctive Christ of both Matthew and John, Matthew's Messiah whose dignity lies in his acceptance of humiliation; John's royal and divine figure so visibly present as he walks his way.

It has been said that Luke has transposed the Passion from the key of tragedy to the key of pathos. His is a story of martyrdom (and of course, he makes Stephen's martyrdom, in his second book, The Acts of the Apostles, a close parallel to the death of Jesus). Luke's Jesus is the classical wise-man, whose self-control, freedom from fear, and courage, was a model for his followers. Notice too the lengths to which he goes to exonerate Pilate of Jesus' death (23:1-24); the Jewish leaders still bear much of the responsibility, and he makes it clear that the crowd is manipulated. Luke's Jesus will not let Judas kiss him (22:48). He is generous to his persecutors. Luke (alone) tells us that Jesus healed the high priest's servant whose ear was cut off at his arrest (22:51). Luke's Jesus (alone) gives us the word: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (23:34 - though some ancient texts lack this verse).

Luke alone allows a graced word to the thief on the cross (23:43), and he alone allows us to hear Jesus' final prayer: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (23: 46).

But an evangelist Luke *is*, and he is the one who tells us the good news of the genesis and growth of the church, the company of the witnesses of the resurrection, the apostles, and those whom they called to faith and baptized in Jesus' name (e.g. 2: 41-42). It is no small thing to have declared the extraordinary scope of God's forgiveness, and for whom? – his executioners and those who so unjustly plotted it (23:34). (Some of you may know the legend where Jesus at the Last Day, waits for Judas to come and sit down at the banquet table.) And the church *has* the extraordinary calling to love enemies and to pray for them. To Luke also belongs that account of the Last Supper where Jesus takes a cup first, then bread, and then a cup (22: 14-20; some ancient texts lack v. 20), and reveals to us perhaps the only hint we have of the ritual of Passover meal of Jesus' time, with several cups.

And if this Jesus walks with a cool dignity through the mayhem of humanity's hatreds, there is good news for us who easily despair in the face of our time's stupidities, the inescapability of our inhumanity. We carry our cross in company with a God who in Christ knows and loves us, ever seeks us, and who invites us with mercy into his promised kingdom.
