

Easter 6
9/5/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 16:9 - 15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21:10, 22 – 22:5

John 14:23 - 29

Remembering a life that conquers death

In the days leading up to Holy Week a regiment of British Soldiers left for Afghanistan. Although their attitude was calm and realistic, a priest who observed their preparations noted a pervading air of seriousness. They were well prepared for the danger they were facing, and the reality that, for some of them, the future may include death. The sight of troops paraded to leave is stomach churning enough for us, and we can only guess what it is like for the participants and their families. The priest said it caused him to reflect deeply on what it is that really matters in life.

We know from our own experience that at such moments of parting, words are uttered with a deeper intent. And we know that after the event, whether it be a success or a failure, what was said is often remembered as having greater power and meaning than it might otherwise have acquired.

The Gospel reading for today is a farewell discourse given in context of the Passover. It is remembered in the church with a special intensity because in what followed involved more than the death of a man on a dusty Middle Eastern hill. We remember these words because this was a life that conquered death. In the section we have heard today, the words of Jesus look through and beyond his death to speak of another presence: the gift of the Spirit, the life-giving power of God. As we begin to prepare for the celebration of Ascension and Pentecost, the placing of this reading here is a reminder that in John, the promised gift of the Spirit is fulfilled at Easter. As far as John is concerned all of the great fifty days of the Easter Season is a celebration of the power of the Spirit, at work in the world, to heal and bless and reconcile. That is why during the Easter Season the Early Church created a Lectionary containing these powerful stories from the Acts of the Apostles such as the conversion of Paul and the advance of the Christian mission into Europe. That is also why we hear the grand visions from Revelation, which seem to us to have a future reference, but which celebrate how here and now Jesus who was crucified was raised to share the sovereignty of God.

In his farewell discourse Jesus articulates what it means to be a disciple. It means firstly to find in Jesus, not a good man who did good things, even though he is surely that. It means to see him as the one who reveals the heart of God to us, and to enter into the worship and service of God, in the pattern we learn from him. That pattern is discernable here as being formed by humiliation, crucifixion, and resurrection. In their broader context, Jesus' parting words point to God who bears the humiliation of being "not God" but one of us, who gives himself to the end, even to the point of being a victim. In short, the pattern of God's work amongst us is marked by the sign of a Cross, and what we learn from this pattern, which in John is accompanied by Resurrection and the gift of the Spirit, is that the heart of God is turned towards us and identifies with us at the point of our most profound isolation and deepest suffering, and through suffering love, conquers all that we mean by death. Short of tossing John's Gospel out of the New Testament all together there is no sidestepping the point that this is the essence of God as revealed by Jesus. God is suffering love that reaches out to the world: humble, suffering love is the foundation of life in creation, is expressed fully in the cross and resurrection, and is the source of the Peace that brings reconciliation between those who are otherwise opposed. That is why Jesus calls us to live in these words.

The function of the Spirit, especially as we see it in this section of John, is to "teach us everything". That does not mean it will introduce us to some vague sort of all encompassing spirituality. To "teach us everything" is to remind us of all that Jesus said and did, but there is more to this than some sort of fundamentalist "remembering the words of Jesus". It means understanding that the pattern of God's grace amongst us, which *always*, somehow, reveals the sign of the cross. The pattern of God's grace amongst us will always challenge pompous patriarchy that sits back pleased at its superior ecclesiastical, intellectual or political efforts. It will undermine the aggressive grandiosity that seeks to rule the world in self-righteousness regardless of the needs of others. It will always favour the weak, the outsider, the lost, and seek to set the guilty free. The work of the Spirit is to show us specifically, this is the pattern that lies at the heart of God, and is expressed in and for the world in "all that Jesus said and did".

We know that in our day people have a lot of trouble with the text "*I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me*". The problem we have with it is it sounds exclusive of other claims to faith, and it does not sit well with a pluralistic understanding of the world. This is made worse by the fact that those who most love to quote this text often give off the air that their understanding of the text is the right one. What matters in this text is that it is Jesus' stance before God that is the clue to the truth about life. This means there will be many who think they are on the way with Jesus, because they have the right words, but the pattern of the cross is not over their life and they have succumbed to some other tutelage. And because God is the one in charge here, not us, this text actually sets us free to see that in our conversations about faith and life with our Hindu or Muslim or Indigenous neighbours we may suddenly come across clearer signs of the pattern of grace that reflects the cross, than can sometimes be found in the Christian community. There may be others out there who, without having named it, are living in the pattern of God's suffering heart, while others who could be are not. What we have to look for, within the church and beyond its borders is the stance before God as represented in the Cross.

This brings me to Lydia. I do feel sorry that many theologians and people with an interest in faith universally bag the word “Spirituality”. It is frustrating that one of the problems with spirituality is that it has become a catch all name for one more consumer product that bears no relation to the deep rigorous disciplines that are part of the spiritual traditions of the world.

But the story of Lydia shows that when Paul was led by the Spirit to evangelise in a new place he first went to the place of prayer: that is the place where people with earnest intentions about faith and life were meeting. They may have been Jews, who had no synagogue. They may have been a more cosmopolitan gathering of Seekers. But Paul did not start preaching in the street. He went to where those who had some apprehension of faith were gathered. If he did this in our day, he might well started at a meeting of Spirituality in the Pub!

Lydia was an earnest seeker after God, but it was not Paul’s efforts or hers that brought her to faith. It was the work of the Spirit: “the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what he said”[v 14b]. In the place set aside for seekers after faith, the Spirit enabled her to give hospitality to the word of God, and in return, she gave hospitality to the evangelists, and the church at Philippi, and the church in Europe was born. It is no coincidence that it is in Paul’s letter to the Philippians that we are given a very clear picture of the cruciform pattern of God’s love for the world.

What does all this add up to? As a Christian community, life in the Spirit is not lived in vagueness about God: it sees a particular pattern in God, that is demonstrated in a life and a death remembered here with great intensity, every time we break bread and drink wine together. What matters is not that we remember this death but that we remember this was a life that conquered death: it broke all barriers. It is because of this life in the Spirit involves crossing over to new places and having new experiences, as the Spirit leads us. And in the journeys we so engage, we will live in openness. The sort of openness that discovers more of the richness that is yet to be yielded up by these texts we hear year after year. And the sort of openness that is ready to acknowledge ways in which God may have gone before us into the world in life shaped by the cross, just as Jesus promised.
