

Pentecost 2
6/6/2010

Mark the Evangelist

1 Kings 17:8 - 24
Psalm 146
Galatians 1:11 – 24
Luke 7:11 - 24

An outpost of life in an island of death

Jesus' encounter with the widow of Nain is a very powerful story and the last in a long series of actions Jesus took following his visit to the Synagogue at Nazareth. On that occasion he read the words from the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free.
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.* [Luke 4: 18 – 19]

To the amazement those present Jesus said these words had come true in their hearing, but when he went on to show the grace of God was not restricted to the limited ideas his audience placed upon it they were outraged and drove him out. Immediately he began a ministry in Galilee. The narrative in the two or three chapters between the incident in Nazareth and the story of the widow of Nain reads as a long demonstration of what the year of the Lord's Jesus announced in the Synagogue: Jesus cast out an unclean spirit from a man possessed, healed Simon's mother in law and rebuked several demons. When he went off to pray but the disciples sought him out and he gave them a succinct statement that explained his mission: "*I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to other cities*" [Luke 4:43]. He preached from a boat on the shore, led the disciples to a great catch of fish, calmed the storm that threatened to swamp their boat, reached out to touch and heal a leper, was embroiled in conflict with the Pharisees because he announced the forgiveness of sins, and preached the Sermon on the Plain which begins: "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God*" [Luke 6:20]. All of this and more is the context for the story of the widow of Nain which tells us this is Luke's proclamation of who Jesus is for us: he is the embodiment of the Kingdom present among us.

Commentators tend to treat the raising of the Widow of Nain's son as one more miracle in Jesus' ministry, but it is more than that: it is the final demonstration of the meaning of all that has gone before. This last action needs to be seen for what it is. Widows were among the most poor and marginalized in the society of the time and the widow of Nain had double trouble. After the loss of her husband she had been able to live in the expectation of being supported by her only son, but his death delivered her into the realm of extreme vulnerability and uncertainty. As well as the grief over her loss, his death had the potential to turn her life into a living death.

The action takes place outside the gates of Nain because death was defiling and burials did not take place inside the walls. At the sight of the funeral Jesus “had compassion” for the widow. To have compassion means being able to “feel with” the other, to be able to separate from one’s own feelings and prejudices well enough to stand in the other person’s shoes. Compassion is the basis for real empathy. It is the basis for love, which in the bible is not an emotion, but a creative act directed towards the good of the other. In word and in deed Jesus moved to comfort the one who mourned the most, and in so doing fulfilled the words of the Sermon on the Plain: “*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh*” [Luke 6:21b].

Luke is the only one who tells this story, and he says: “*Jesus came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still*” [Luke 7:14a]. Jesus intervened to stop death in its tracks, and in touching the bier risked becoming polluted himself. But he went further than that. He said: “*Young man, I say to you, rise!*” [Luke 7:14b]. The Greek word for “rise” here is the same as is used to proclaim Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. This “last sign” in Jesus’ long ministry in Galilee is more than another miracle. It is a demonstration, ahead of time, that the power of God is in him, the power of life, which breaks the power of death. The last sign resembles the sign that was present in the ministry of Elijah the prophet in Kings, and it shows what it looks like when the Kingdom is opened to us, and the full depth God’s favor is manifest on earth.

In the Sundays after Pentecost our texts lead us to reflect on what it means to be disciples of Christ joined in community, engaged in sharing God’s mission of bringing life to the world.

You may have seen the Film *Molokai*, the story of Fr Damien [1840-89] a priest who, after serving for a decade as a missionary in the Hawaiian islands volunteered [1873] to go to a colony on the island of Molokai where 600 lepers lived without care or attention. In the film there is a poignant scene where, as Fr Damien is about to depart to take up his work, his Bishop says to him: “remember don’t touch them or eat with them”. Damien ignored this advice. For years he ministered to his charges single handedly, dressing their wounds, building them houses and burying their dead. Damien eventually died from leprosy but not before he had put out his hand to stop the progress of death. He became an outpost of life in an island of death, a living a sign of God’s favor shown to the poor, the outcast and the marginalized who, thanks to his self-sacrifice – were given a better life. Like the one in whose name he served, Damien was willing to touch death and sup with it, in order that those who were suffering could catch a glimpse of the extravagant hospitality of God. It cost him his life, but in him the glory of God shone through.

To be an outpost of life in an island of death is not a bad image for the church that seeks to follow Jesus. It could also be a good basis for a Mission or Vision statement. And it would apply not only to the sort of death that brings our mortal life to an end. There is a different form of death the atmosphere of which is all about us – in the form of the hopelessness and despair that is born of lack of meaning or purpose. There is the obsession that comes from living as though material satisfaction is the only real centre of life. There is the deep self-centredness that fools itself into thinking that what I want is all there is to life.

There are also places where the death of hopelessness and despair goes hand in hand with the death of body and soul that occurs directly through violence or indirectly through the slow burn of oppression and starvation, such as the Palestinians are caused to suffer in Gaza. In a nation where, of all places in the world, the covenant of promise given to Abraham should make it possible for all people to live in justice and peace, islands of death continue to be created by one side laying siege to the other, erecting walls, cutting off vital supplies and oppressing people through cruelty and fear. While there are issues for both sides to face, in the light of the current response to a flotilla of peace, an unarmed, non-violent program to halt death in Gaza, it is hard to see any credibility in the Israeli Government's claim to be reasonable or evenhanded. The flotilla is sailing to bring life to the island of death that is Gaza. How could the church help? One suggestion is that the churches could call for the world's leading Christian nation to send in its navy to guarantee safe passage to the ships that seek to break through the barrier that brings death to many. [*The Tablet*, Editorial, 5 June 2010].

As we meet to do our business at the AGM today, it is worth remembering that as church we do have to be good stewards of our material goods, but we are privy to a calling in which these things are only a means to another end. We are followers of the one who called us to offer service that brings life, not death, to others. May our congregations and Mission Council be faithful to this calling, and create outposts of life in our communities, working to put a stop to all forms of death, so that people can live in freedom, to the praise and glory of God.
