

Pentecost 16
12/9/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 4:11 -12, 22 -28

Psalm 14

1 Timothy 1:12 - 17

Luke 15:1 - 10

The God who seeks us out

In 2001 Peter Carey's book "*True History of the Kelly Gang*" won instant acclaim for its stunning portrayal of Ned Kelly, Australia's most legendary heroic figure. Carey based his text on *The Jerilderie Letter* written by Kelly himself. He wrote in the idiom of the letter and spoke as if in Ned's own voice. The effect was to create a powerful story that allowed the reader to get inside the mask and travel with Kelly himself on the long journey from his deprived childhood to the dramatic showdown at Glenrowan. One commentator said: "For the first time... we see Kelly in close up. It's Carey who finally makes the capture, with a vision as powerful as [Sidney] Nolan's." Peter Carey wrote the book but he did so in such way that it could be taken to be the very words of Ned Kelly himself. According to modern copyright laws Peter Carey had to state it was his work, but in an earlier age it would have been possible for him to put Kelly's name at the bottom of the page, and Ned would have taken credit for the writing.

In New Testament times it was customary for people to write claiming the authority of another, and using that person's name, not their own. It is not possible for us to do that because it offends our understanding of truthfulness, and we have laws connected with copyright and plagiarism to deter such practices. From the first decades of the second century "Paul's letters to Timothy" have had a place amongst the works of Paul, but almost no one thinks he wrote them. Their focus is no longer the urgent missionary work that was Paul's preoccupation. They are now concerned with tending existing churches and for this reason have been dubbed "Pastoral Epistles", which is a bit of a misnomer because all of Paul's letters were pastoral. These letters have more likely been written some decades later by a person who, faced with similar difficulties to those Paul dealt with, wrote in Paul's name and appealed to his heritage so that the weight of this authority would be effective in the situation. The customs of the time allowed the writer to do this, without explanation.

Modern scholars have been inclined to focus on the ways in which letters such as 1 and 2 Timothy (and Titus) do not reflect the genre of Paul's writing. But in their contemporary context what mattered was the ways in which the author entered into Paul's story and what he made use of in sending his message of instruction and encouragement to the community that was being addressed.

The “kernel of truth” in 1 Timothy is the way the author recounts Paul’s own story of his conversion: his transition from life as a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence against the church (1:13) to being an Apostle to the Gentiles. The story matches what Paul says in his “undisputed letters”. What is different is that here it is said God showed mercy to him “because he acted in ignorance”. In his undisputed letters Paul never says divine grace and compassion came to him because he was ignorant. Apart from this one variation, the message is clear and consistent: when he was acting as an enemy of Christ, the God of merciful love searched Paul and the deep sense of forgiveness he gained from the encounter led to a complete about face. Paul embraced his call and took his place within God’s mission of offering renovating, merciful love to the world.

When people relate their faith story these days, it often turns out to be “about them”. Not so with Paul. He says very little about himself and emphasizes how God’s grace invaded his life and transformed his direction and mission. Luke made use of his story, for example it appears 3 times in the book of Acts (Acts 9, 22, 26), collecting various embellishments each time. But as far as Paul himself was concerned the story was never a self-indulgent exercise focused on him. It was a celebration of God’s patient generous grace that searched for him. This he characterized as the power of suffering love revealed in the Cross. When whoever it was who wrote 1 Timothy wanted to claim an authority greater than his own, the author appealed to the one thing that gave Paul legendary status in the church: the story of God’s cruciform love that reached into his life and turned him round.

In the Gospel for today the Pharisees are pictured in a stereotypical stance of “grumbling”. The cause is Jesus who, as on a number of previous occasions, has overstepped the boundary of accepted social behaviour and “welcomed sinners and shared food with them” [15:1-2]. Not so much in this passage, but generally, Luke sees the eagerness in of the crowds who come to Jesus as having about it the expectation that God will be present in this hospitable encounter. We should not underestimate the power of Jesus’ hospitality: the fact that God receives sinners. But consider this scene! The religious leaders were grumbling and suspicious and resentful of Jesus, because his freedom to relate to people who were seen as being beyond the pale threatened their way of functioning in life and their idea of holiness. On the other hand sinners, people who had fallen short, were somehow marginalized or otherwise in the position of being outsiders were hoping to find divine mercy and acceptance in sharing hospitality with Jesus. Table fellowship was both the cause for deep division, and the sign that new possibilities for life open up when barriers are breached and those rejected in normal community life are embraced. Luke tells us there is more joy in God’s heart over one person who has joined the meal, than 99 who never had to make the journey.

The parables Jesus' tells are his answer to the religious leaders, and we should not miss the fact that the key figure in each, the shepherd and the woman, were people who, at some level, suffered discrimination in that society. These are stories about seeking love that is expressed by the outsider for the alienated and it reflects what Jesus himself was doing. The story contrasts the reactions of the powerful and the marginalised and it shows how when grace is seen to be at work people take sides. The irony is that in offering the acceptance that had transforming power, Jesus caused division amongst the people whom he sought to heal. There is as dramatic contrast in Luke between the joy in heaven over what is happening in company with Jesus and the grumbling of the religious leaders. In actual fact the grumblers are doing more than expressing discontent over Jesus' behaviour: they are resistant to grace; they are grumbling against God. In refusing to embrace Jesus' hospitality towards the marginalised, they themselves have gone astray and have become lost. When it came to understanding the mission of God, they had lost the plot.

When the writer of 1 Timothy wanted to speak with authority to his audience, he recalled Paul's key story about the searching love of God that had embraced him and set him on an entirely new path. When Jesus told the parables about the God who seeks us out, it was aimed at his audience. They were meant to find themselves addressed somewhere in these stories.

Where do these stories speak to us today? Where do we find ourselves in this crowd? Are we grumblers, seething with discontent, muttering to others and ourselves about the faults of the church and advantage this seems to give to some? We may actually be resisting grace and grumbling against God. Are we amongst the lost? Those who have all the advantages of modern life and yet find themselves troubled in spirit, longing for the deeper nourishment of grace but with no clear path before them to find it?

What the Gospel says is God is a searching God and what we are looking for may be right in front of us: in words that bring hope and comfort and in the hospitality expressed by the community of faith. If we want to discover grace amongst us, search to see where joy is to be found. Ironically, even the voice of grumblers may point us to the place we need to look.
