

Lent 4
18/3/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Numbers 21:4 – 9

Psalms 107

Ephesians 2:1 - 10

John 3:11 - 21

On resisting the call of God

There is a natural tendency for humans to resist the call of God. Ministers and teachers of faith and spirituality must face the fact that this is a reality of life in the people they work with, and in themselves. Reading the Gospels we repeatedly see how the disciples and those who meet Jesus recognise that something significant is at work in and through him, then demonstrate they just don't get it.

The story of Nicodemus is a vivid case in point. Our reading of Nicodemus' story began at the point where Jesus complains that if Nicodemus fails to understand "earthly things" - normal realities that fall within knowledge as we know it - what chance is there he will be able to grasp "heavenly things" the level of reality gifted to us by the Spirit, represented by what the NT calls the Kingdom of God and Eternal Life?

Nicodemus is a teacher and leader of the people who seems sympathetic towards Jesus. Given that the Gospels were written later, reading between the lines we can catch a glimpse here of the relationship between the Jesus movement and its origins. When Nicodemus and Jesus meet interfaith dialogue has begun! The traditions of the Synagogue and the emerging church were in conversation with each other.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. In John's Gospel knowledge of God is associated with the light that broke forth amongst us in the Word made flesh. His was a life of light that the darkness has been unable to conquer [Jn 1:1-5].

Nicodemus said to Jesus: "*Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do the signs you do apart from God*" [Jn 3:2]. He has glimpsed something but he is not there yet. When Jesus tells him no one can see the Kingdom unless they are "born from above" – remade by the power and gift of God's life-giving Spirit" - Nicodemus is completely flummoxed. He, a religious leader and teacher, cannot understand what it would mean to see the Kingdom. He cannot unbend sufficiently from his present theological position to allow the Spirit to lead him see the world from a new perspective informed by Jesus who has come from God, and will return to God by way of being lifted up on the Cross.

The really big idea all the Gospels proclaim is that the Kingdom of God has gained a foothold in the world through Jesus. His Spirit empowered obedience allowed him to speak and act with an authority that was recognized as being "other" - from God. Because Jesus did not snatch at equality with God and his obedience did not flag the possibility of a new future has emerged.

The Kingdom of God is not a place and Eternal Life is not a description of the hereafter as such. The Kingdom is information about the one who reigns and it affects everything we know. It creates a new state of being for us; it opens up a new opportunity for life. Eternal life is what we share when, in faith, we sign on to that information, and take our place in the Kingdom. Such faith is not an opiate, a drug that blots out all the nasty bits in order to keep us content with a cruel and unjust world. Sharing the state of being that is the Kingdom and knowing the benefits of Eternal life are heavenly realities, but they empower us to be even more stubborn and purposeful about the way care for one another, and the world we live in.

The centre of our text includes “the Gospel in miniature”[Luther] John 3:16 – “*For God so loved the world...*” God’s love for the world is expressed everywhere in scripture, but it is John who names it as the essence of God. John here amplifies the idea when he says that God reached out to love the world rather than to condemn it. This is not wishy-washy stuff. John is not saying the world is a good place and we can stop worrying. For him it is still a self-centred dark place that lives over against God. And yet this is the very place in which the light of God’s love has shone, in Jesus Christ. That is why John regards Jesus as determinative: he becomes the measure of all things.

We do not use the word salvation much these days, but what it means in terms of this text is this: when we realize God resolutely loves the world. And when we respond by falling in love with God and choosing to live in love for one another, then we have salvation: then we have eternal life.

It seems unbelievable but this is what Nicodemus resists. He just can’t respond to the call to go beyond what he knows. He can’t give up control and enter a new level of intimacy with God. Like a moth attracted to a lamp, he has come to the light only to turn and go back into the darkness where what he really is stays hidden. Although Nicodemus continues to have associations with Jesus, ever after he speaks from the sidelines [Jn 7:50-52], and acts in secret and in the dark [Jn 19:58-59]. He has condemned himself because he has seen the light but did not choose to live in it.

The Vision this Congregation has operated on for many years now says that we are here “*to show forth the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ*”. We know well how hard it is to live up to such a statement. And we know that not all who receive our expression of God’s love treat it as saving grace.

Kenneth Clark, who hosted the erudite TV series *Civilization* declared in his autobiography that he was a committed secular humanist. He said he did not look down on religion or was indifferent to it. On the contrary, he saw in it some beautiful things, but he did not believe. It happened that one day Kenneth Clark was sitting in the church of San Lorenzo in Italy. He said: “For a few minutes my whole being was irradiated with a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had ever known.” The whole event enthralled him and he said he considered himself quite unworthy of such a beautiful experience and could not understand why it was given to him. But as he reflected on it, he was faced with an awkward question. What should he do? Not being religious he felt if he said yes at this particular point in his life, his family and friends would think he had gone off the deep end. So like many others he said no. He wrote: “I think I was right. I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course, but no doubt I had felt the finger of God and I am quite sure that, although the memory of that experience has faded, it helped me understand the joy of the saints.”

When the Kingdom touches us, it exposes what is sacred to us. For Kenneth Clark the experience was enough to allow him to understand the joy of the saints, but he was too embedded in the world to change course and join them.

The season of Lent is for reminding us that we find the source of our life in the rich mercy of God, who continues to love us even when we are dead in our sins. That is the strength in which we are invited to live. What it calls for is the courage to believe it.
