

Easter 3
22/4/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 3:12 - 19
Psalm 4
I John 3:1 – 7
Luke 24:36b - 48

Sermon preached by Rev Dr Morag Logan

In ancient times, people gazed into the skies, and saw - the sun moon and stars, yes, but they also perceived patterns, the shapes that moved together across the skies; saw changes with times and seasons; saw shapes, patterns and movements that made sense out of, gave a pattern to the passing of time, the changes in the year. This is not something that we do. Some do gaze at the stars, for a profession, as an amateur, or for romantic reasons, but we have other ways of measuring time and the seasons, and most of us at least, no longer see significance or draw meaning from the shapes we see in the heavens.

Now, in case any of you should be concerned about either my sanity, or my orthodoxy, let me make it clear: I am not advocating astrology; and I am not advocating any form of paganism – neo, new age, classical, or any other type. However, it is an example of a remarkable human ability – to look at a vast amount of information, detail, input, and see patterns, draw meaning from them; and then, over time, to change this. To radically change systems of belief and understanding, to abandon or modify old systems which no longer bring meaning. In the stories we read today, we see something of this happening.

It can be hard to see, when the new belief system is no longer new to us, when it is commonplace. However, in these stories we are looking back into a time within days of the resurrection, something entirely new and unexpected, and at this time, even at the time of the writing of these texts the understanding of this event is still being shaped. It is commonplace to us to connect Jesus, as the Messiah with suffering, with redemptive suffering, but here we are looking back at a time when this was not the case; when this idea and understanding was new and a radical re-arranging of ideas.

In the texts that we read this morning from Acts and from Luke, in both of them we are coming in half way through a story, which adds to the complexity. In Luke, the text that we read is the second half of the appearance of Jesus to two disciples on the Road to Emmaus; where on the road Jesus interpreted the scriptures to them, before he was recognized by them, and is recognized by them in the breaking of the bread. The Acts story tells of the start of a series of reactions to a healing done by Peter, where he makes a speech explaining the healing to people. In both of these stories, a re-examination, a re-reading of the scriptures is central.

Peter's speech is addressed to the astonished crowd that has gathered at Solomon's gate whom Peter addresses as "Israelites". The speech seeks to explain to the crowd what the healing means. The healing is not a sign of Peter's own power or piety but a sign of what is possible through "faith in his name," through faith in the name of Jesus. The speech (and we did not read all of it) offers an interpretation of the healing by tying the event to an account of what God has accomplished in Christ, then spelling out the implications. A major feature of the speech is the interpretation of the Scriptures. A range of passages are either cited, or alluded to:

God's promises to Abraham,

God's promises to David, and the Davidic line,

The servant who suffers, from various sections of Isaiah,

the references to "name" in v. 16 seems to allude to Joel 2:32 ("whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved").

Jesus is identified as "seed of Abraham," "servant," and "lord," as Messiah, with all of the kingly imagery that is associated with this, and as a prophet, the prophet according to Moses, whom God will raise up, to whom God's people are obliged to listen.

In the Luke passage the identification is with the Messiah, and reading, re-reading the scriptures to explain the necessity of the suffering of the Messiah. So the imagery all in play here is Messiah tradition, the suffering servant, imagery of Kings, of prophets, and connections are made with Abraham, with David, with Moses.

Now this is not in what anyone would call a fixed form. This is not a doctrinal exposition here – there is a mixture of imagery from different parts of the scriptural inheritance of their time.

Not all of this is immediately or obviously addressed to us, or a community like ours. The Acts passage, for example, witnesses to us of a discussion within a Jewish community, a struggle for understanding within that community, one where we stand pretty much on the outside, outside inheritors of the outworking of this discussion. As such external inheritors, we rightly take great caution in working with such speeches Blaming "the Jews" for the crucifixion is a complex matter, which we can't really go into today, it's sufficient to say that it makes one kind of sense as a discussion within a Jewish community, something quite different when said from the outside, especially with the centuries of intermittent conflict and persecution that stand in between. So not all of this is aimed at us.

This is also not, I believe, an example of good methodology in scriptural interpretation. Allusions and connections are made, a lot of which seems to be done on some principles of word association that are not always clear to us, and they are not always allusions and connections that biblical scholars today would find sound.

However, and I think I'm done with the caveats for the moment, these passages are an inspiration to us. In these passages we see pattern making, interpretation being done. Yes, it is chaotic. The emergence of new ideas and new ways of thinking probably always is. With the resurrection, the power of God breaks into the world in a new and different way, and through the presence of the risen Lord among them the scriptural inheritance find a new shape for this newly born Jewish Christian community, different understandings are emerging, these are strange and new ways of reading old and familiar texts.

We believe this is taking place in this new way at the resurrection, but we also believe that this continues to take place among us, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. This does not make the process ever less chaotic, the emergence of completely new ideas and pattern forming cleaner, more organized or structured, but it carries for us the promise that the word of God is, and can be ever new among us.

This can be sometimes as we meet in small numbers as strangers on the road, talking over the great events of our time or our individual lives, reaching for new understandings of the world around us.

This can be, sometimes, as we gather, in chance or by organization, at times of crisis or regularly in our lives, as we gather in large gatherings as church and ponder and deliberate as a whole church on our lives and times.

Most often for us, it is as we come together as this individual community of faith, now, to reflect, in the presence of the risen Lord among us, on the meaning of our scriptures, the new meanings and patterns these scriptures can and may have for us. This can be as we come together in small groups, to study and reflect, in meals and fellowship.

Most significantly, though it is as we gather together on this first day of the week as the disciples gathered then, in this meal we share together, this meal where Jesus is made known to us, again and again, in the breaking of the bread.
