

Mark the Evangelist Day  
6/5/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 40:27-31

Psalm 66

[A reading from Eusebius](#)

Mark 4:26-34

**The rule of God has gained a foothold in the world...**

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Congregations and churches that are named for a patron saint have an advantage. They have an example of someone who lived the Gospel to inspire them; whose life and work provides a measuring rod for their life together in Christ today.

As the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist we are doubly fortunate. We have the stories of his life and deeds others have attached to Mark in the past [see OOS]. And as the author of one of the four Gospels, Mark has left us a significant resource to support our ongoing faith and life.

Mark's Gospel was intended to set forth his vision of God, and promote faith in Jesus Christ as the agent of God, who brought God's Kingdom to us. That is why he begins with: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God* [Mk 1:1]. And that is why Jesus' preaching begins: *The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news.* [Mk 1:15]. The Greek word for Kingdom is best translated as "rule" or "regime" because the original refers, not to a localized political entity, but to regime, a state of being in which people live. Mark's message is that Jesus brought the regime of God's merciful, loving purposes to the world. The rule of God has gained a foothold here, and willing [repentant] hearts are able to participate in its gift and engage in the mission it implies.

He chose to describe to what he wrote as Gospel. In this he nuanced two available versions of the word: one from Isaiah that announced to despondent people in captivity that the liberating rule of God was at hand. The other from the Greco-Roman context that was used to announce a happy event: a birth, a marriage or a victory in battle. Good News is fundamental to Mark.

Mark's Gospel is always, primarily, about God's relationship with us. There were things present in his context that affect the slant he gives to what he wrote. He is thought to have written in context of the late 60 or early 70s, when Christians suffered persecution [64 CE] and knew of the devastation of Jerusalem by the Romans. Their context was chaotic and threatening and Mark knew that the emerging Christian movement made progress with difficulty, pressed by forces outside itself, and disturbed by difficulties within its ranks.

And in setting forth his view of the Kingdom, he takes his audience into the scary world of demons, apocalyptic upheavals and betrayals. Misunderstanding fear and hostility repeatedly dogged Jesus' ministry. There is no doubt Mark's view of Christian living is that the path is surrounded by difficulties and disappointment, which put vibrant Christian communities at risk. But none of this changes Mark's fundamental idea that in Jesus Christ the reign of God gained foothold in the world and that living the Gospel includes not being paralyzed or ruled by the negatives in our context.

Although Mark's Jesus appears to be weak and a failure, because he lives under the rule of God, he is the Stronger One who puts the demons to flight, raises people to new life, and conquers even the doubt and fear of the disciples.

Certain modern problems did not affect Mark in the way they affect us. For him, as for all four Evangelists, the Resurrection is not in doubt: it is a fundamental presupposition that has inspired their writing, and without it, we would not have the New Testament. But even though the Resurrection is all through his work, Mark's is the most challenging of the Gospels because, unlike the others, he does not offer a comforting vision of the presence of the Risen Christ. He is able to live with a sense of absence as well as a sense of presence.

The reading chosen for today is part of a series of parables about seeds and sowing that relate to the rule of God. The first part, about the seed growing secretly, is Mark's own, and is not repeated by Matthew and Luke. The parable envisages a three-stage process in the growth of a harvest. First "a man" sows the seed, then there is a long period when the seed sprouts and grows, without the help of the sower, and finally when the grain is ripe the sower reaps the harvest. These words have baffled interpreters but Mark is urging his audience to think of God as the person who sowed the seed then sat back, allowing the process of growth to run its course. The sowing took place in the work of Jesus Christ, who was "planted in the earth" in every sense and became the first of the new growth to appear. The time in which Mark's audience lives, which includes our time, is when the rule of God is taking hold and growing in the soil of receptive hearts. The sower [God] seems to be absent, waiting for the harvest to ripen when, at the right time it will be gathered in to God. [Brendan Byrne *Costly Freedom, a theological reading of Mark's Gospel* p89-9, to whom I owe many ideas in this sermon].

In his context of dark days, persecution and disruption, the idea that God is absent but meanwhile the rule of God, firmly planted in the world is growing, and inevitably would bear fruit, was a word of comfort. Many found this hard to understand because they expected different outcomes. But there were those who did see.

We think of parables as nice stories, but in Mark's day they were thought of as riddles that obscured the truth except to those who perceived the secret about God's presence in Christ. That is why he says: *With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it* [Mk 4:33].

If the first parable speaks a word of encouragement through its message about the hidden nature of the growth of God's rule, the second, about the insignificance of the mustard seed that grows into a large tree offers further encouragement. The rule of God may begin in a tiny way, but its outcome will be vast, and will be great enough to embrace not only the outsiders of Mark's society but all the nations of the world.

The take home message from these parables is that we should not live from our difficulties or disappointments. While the rule of God does progress with difficulty divine love has been planted in the world and that love will ultimately triumph over the negativity of the present. This makes worship and mission possible, even in a context where no one else cares or believes.

These are tough times for the church. We are suffering a reduction of significance, and even shame and scorn in the eyes of the prevailing culture. But Mark's words are particularly suited to address the failures of our day, and rightly understood may awaken hope where the corrosive effects of disillusionment are being felt.

At present we ourselves are in a complex stage of considering how to take seriously what it means for his congregation to be at mission in this suburb. As more thoughts are shared and plans begin to be put together, numerous people have said, “but those around us are not interested in what we have to offer”. Do you really think this was the guiding thought that ruled Mark the Evangelist’s mind when he wrote his work, or set out to give leadership to the emerging church in Rome or Alexandria? A few centuries later, when the Roman Empire was crashing to the ground in disarray, Benedict of Nursia did not say: “I won’t risk my life developing communities that live, preferring Christ before all else, because the young people may not be interested.” And when Pope Gregory sent Augustine to Canterbury to evangelize England, do you think the missionaries thought of abandoning the mission because the people did not speak the language, or did not share their way of life? Each case involved a clash of regime. And as the notes on the Icon for the day says, the Christians knew they were “living under a different dispensation from that which rules the world”. And it had to be dealt with. A gift of gracious love had taken root in their hearts. They were driven by a burning desire to respond to God’s love regardless of the cultural boundaries that needed to be crossed.

You may have seen the ABC program Q&A in which Cardinal George Pell and Richard Dawkins were set up for a “debate”. Under the circumstances no worthwhile outcome was possible. Cardinal Pell was not free to say what he thought. He was bound to speak according to the dictates of his church. He did not manage to engage Richard Dawkins’ serious and important questions and the result was disappointing.

What interested me was the news that Richard Dawkins was in Australia to promote a book he has written to attract intelligent young people to his ideas. Where does the church have a similar project underway? Where have we invested our resources to put forward the case for Christian faith in a world enslaved to materialism and different versions of so-called scientific rationalist thinking?

Why should we do that anyway? Perhaps we should do it because we know of a greater framework of meaning and purpose has taken root in the world. A seed has been sown that has something to offer for the benefit of all. It is still growing and, despite the difficulties, still has the capacity to offer hope where doubt and disappointment, and rampant self-interest hold their paralyzing sway.

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