

Epiphany 3
27/1/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Nehemiah 8:1-4a; 5-6; 8-12

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Luke 4:14-21

On receiving the disturbing word of God

Flannery O'Connor tells a story of Mrs Turpin, a hard-working, upright church-going farmer's wife, who was unexpectedly attacked by a mentally disturbed teenage girl in a doctor's waiting room. Mrs Turpin had been in conversation with another person in which she continually expressed superior attitudes towards white trash and blacks when the girl, in frustration, erupted. She threw a large book at Mrs Turpin grabbed her around the throat and called her "a wart-hog from hell." A shocked Mrs Turpin could not get the girl's words out of her mind. At home she went and stood by the pigpen and gazed at the pigs as she struggled with her outrage at being called a warthog. She knew she was a good person, far superior to white trash and blacks. She reminded God of all the good work she did for the church, and said angrily: "what did you send me a message like that for?" As she continued to stare into the pigpen she glimpsed a mystery. She had a vision of a parade of souls marching to heaven, with white trash, lunatics and social outcasts at the front and respectable people like herself at the rear. The shocked expressions on their faces showed that all their virtues were being burned away. Mrs Turpin returned to her house with the hallelujahs of the heaven bound saints ringing in her ears. [quoted by D. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p 21].

The outrage in the doctor's waiting room was not just an affront to Mrs. Turpin. It was a revelation, a disclosure that shook her to the core. What she received was more than a piece of information. It made available to her what some call "abysmal life-giving knowledge". Abysmal because it had the capacity to completely de-construct her sense of self: life giving, because it was an opportunity for her to make a fresh start.

Today we have before us in Nehemiah and Luke, two stories of how people received the revelation of Scripture as it was related to them. Scripture is not a collection of information. It is a testimony to the action of God's life-giving Word that breaks into human life, as a surprising and refreshing gift to make known to us the dense mystery of God. The Spirit empowered word comes to us as a disturbing influence that illuminates our self-understanding, and frequently brings with it a call to turn from what we are doing, and embark on new ventures. Consider Moses' encounter with the burning bush (Exod 3:1-15), Isaiah's vision of God the Temple (6:1-8) that gave us the words of we sing at the Eucharist *Holy, Holy, Holy...* or Peter's dream (Acts 10:9ff) that shows him God has no partiality, and so he receives Gentiles into the faith.

Israel was unique in antiquity for having a collection of writings that purport to declare the nature and will of God. And as people of faith who stand in this tradition, the testimony of Scripture comes to us, not as spectators, but as people who are involved in an ongoing conversation with scripture, that bears fruit in renewal of life. Each week the words in our liturgy that introduce and complete the reading of Scripture make it clear: there is no reading of the Word that does not call for our involvement and our response – which some name as ongoing conversion of life. In the readings today we touch on two crucial moments when the Spirit speaks through the words on the page, and touched human hearts, calling for change.

The reading from Nehemiah tells of a dramatic encounter between a remnant of the people of God and the Law of God. After having been in exile for 70 or 80 years the people of Judah were released to return home, where they had to rebuild the Temple, and begin again. When Ezra the priest returned to the city he brought with him a Scroll of the Law of Moses. Scholars argue about what actual text was read to the people, but what counts is that the Spirit spoke through reading of the Law. This was a milestone in liturgical practice and reflects a stage when the public reading and listening to the Law became a central part of worship.

For the sake of hearing Ezra, the people built a pulpit like structure, and attentively gathered around it. Unlike the days of colonial Australia when the government imposed bible reading on prisoners in chains, believing this would be socially improving here there was no coercion. The people who were busy with the reconstruction and renewal of their life were keen to be reunited with the Law.

They knew of the Law, but due to lack of familiarity or change in language in their years away, they not only needed to hear it again, they needed to renew their understanding. Omitted from our reading were two lists of names of people who were interpreters of the Word. What went on that day was not an exercise in literalistic rote learning, nor was it re-engagement with the tired clichés of religious discourse. The people were “given the sense” by teachers who set the words in context so that they heard it afresh in their time, much the same as a sermon seeks to do for us today.

The reaction is notable. The people appear to express grief over what was read to them. Was this because they saw how far they had strayed from God’s purposes, and felt a sense of conviction? Or was it joyful sorrow because hearing something they had lost track of for a long time made them realize what they missed? Or were their tears like those who hear a Shakespearean play and are swept away by the beauty of the language? The tears do not prevent great joy and delight from emerging and make it clear that the people understood what they had heard. The transforming power of God’s grace came through listening to the reading of the Law. The people re-engaged with their enlivened tradition and renewed their faith relationship. Ezra the Priest declared it a day of celebration “holy to the Lord”. Notice that in celebrating the renewed vitality of their God relationship the people were challenged to embrace the deprived and the least in their festive joy. Reconstruction and spiritual renewal were partners. Faith and social life went hand in hand. Word and deed were one.

What we see in Nehemiah occurs again in Luke. The people were again under the authority of a foreign regime when Jesus, speaking in the power of the Spirit, interpreted Isaiah's words as applying to his ministry among them. He not only announced it, he said that in the things he was doing it was fulfilled before their very eyes. In him the very living word of God was present among them. It was a staggering announcement. The long expected day of fulfilment had come. Here is the suffering servant who will turn the hopes of the poor into reality and bring the amnesty and freedom expected in the year of God's favour. Jesus' version of "giving the sense" included putting a fresh spin on Isaiah's words, leaving some out, moving some around: and above all in his self-identification with the text.

It was a powerful day in the Synagogue at Nazareth. It gave rise to a great murmuring. But in this case the people, who had gathered to hear the Word, were not really ready to accept what they heard. It called them to change their view of God, and who they were in relation to God.

The question for those who place themselves in the position of hearing the Gospel is this: are we ready for Gospel? Are we ready to be challenged and have our way of being disturbed? Will we like Mrs Turpin, struggle over the sense of what comes to us. Will we, like the people in Luke, go on to forcibly resist the one who disclosed the mystery of God to us? Or will we be like the battered remnant of the faithful who, as they engaged in picking up the pieces of their life, found in what they heard a sweetness that compared with honey, and a richness that surpassed the value of gold. The way it turns out for us will depend on one thing: readiness for the revelation of the Gospel, and a willingness to go where the changes lead.
