

Lent 3
3/3/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalm 63

I Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

We are in a strange place today. John is not here. Nor is Katharine. Of course there have been plenty of times over the last decade or so that that has been true. But this time is different. This time they are not coming back. It's hard to take in the finality of that, even though we've known it was coming. Even though we've lived through ministers leaving before. How do we feel about it? How do we process it? Do we look back and count the good things John did? And the not so good things? Do we give him a score and move on? Was that what John was doing last week – giving you a score before he shrugs his shoulders and moves on? He certainly had both negative and positive things to say. Was it just his way of washing his hands of us?

I would like to suggest that what John offered – what he invites us to take up – is an evaluation of what you and he did together. What is the fruit in this community of the relationship you shared over those twelve years? What is the abiding life of the relationship? Who have you become? Who is this community? What have you learnt in John's company about your strengths and weaknesses, and what are you going to do with them? What calling have your ears been opened to through John's ministry with you? Into what irrational adventure did he invite you? What sense of purpose do you have? Is there a vision that is your vision – or is there just a "John's vision", now redundant, one of those quirks to be endured with each new minister. "Just go along with him and maybe he won't notice that we're not really here." What fun it is to sit back and judge the minister. Good or bad or in between: what we say in supposedly impartial judgement says more about us than the one we judge. Strength or failure, it is the congregation-with-minister relationship that we measure, and we know it takes two to tango. I trust that you look back on that relationship with joy, joy that travels with you as you go on being the people of God together.

Later this morning you will be voting on a recommendation from the committee charged with identifying a suitable minister for the next phase of your journey. A new minister is something to look forward to. New personality. New skills. New point of view. New vision. New quirks. New entourage. Again the glorious temptation to fold our arms, sit back, see what happens, make our judgement. Let her prove herself before we commit. Let's see if his theology is near enough to ours to give him a pass score. Let's play the game and see how long she takes to notice we're not really here, that we are the audience and she is the performer, fair game for our behind the scenes jeers, applause or "I really think we're above all this" silence. Thank God we know better. Thank God we carry with us the fruit of our recent relationship. Thank God we know who we are, at this point at least, and are eager to discover more of that as we engage in offering ourselves for life giving- life receiving relationship, eager to enter into the new configuration of this faith community as it embraces its chosen leader and inducts him into the adventure that is our gift and calling from God.

Meanwhile there's a sort of in between time. Do we look back or forward or just mark time? Do we set up camp and wait, expecting nothing, enjoying a well-earned rest before we get told to pack up and move on again, just when we're getting to like being settled? Just when we feel like we're in charge and everything is just how we like it? Or is it now more urgent than ever to step out on the strength of a promise that can't be proved and a hope that makes no sense? Do we know who we are or not? If not, how can we form a healthy ministry relationship with the new minister? If so, let's get on with being who we are. Let's have the new minister look and see a relationship partner already more exciting, more alive, more engaged in Christ's mission than even the exaggerations of the profile may have indicated.

Strangely enough, today's scripture readings encourage us to give some similar thought to how we deal with Lent. We could ask of our approach to Lent, "Do we look back or forward or just mark time?"

It's pretty easy to turn the whole thing into an exercise in judgement, looking back at what we have done or not done and giving ourselves ticks and crosses accordingly. Mind you, we need some criteria – morality perhaps, or generosity, or success...average attendance at church, faithfulness in daily bible reading, kind deeds, Facebook friends count, number of people invited home, number of invitations out, number of people invited to church, or just some gut feeling about how tuned in we've been, how much of a good feeling we get on a Sunday morning. Repent of your sins. Submit your list of mistakes and receive forgiveness in return, a new blank sheet to start filling in all over again. Wow.

Of course I am trivialising the whole thing. Life is complicated and sophisticated, as is our faith and its expression here at North Melbourne. Repentance is a way of being, a constant review, a growing capacity to be properly nice people pretty much all the time. We believe well. We worship well. We dress well. We behave well. We're lovely. In fact we've got this whole Lent thing pretty much down pat. A sombre disciplined season we go through every year.

Meanwhile there are people out there in the world with lives ripped apart, literally, destroyed by acts of religious terrorism. People out there with lives lost in the unimaginable forces of wild weather. Australians, even, seemingly random victims of fire and flood, facing the fear and the noise and the utter helplessness and the heart rending clean-ups – and funerals. And there's all those others, Victorians, Melburnians, neighbours whose lives are in the balance one way or another and out of their hands...waiting to know results of medical tests or procedures, or whether they have a job still to go to, or a home still to go to, or a family still to go to. Not their fault. We know that. We know that these things are not carefully targeted punishments for scoring a Distinction on the How Sinful are You Scale. We cringe when we hear the homespun "everything happens for a reason" theology.

Even so, it comes as something of a sharp surprise when we hear in the Gospel reading Jesus saying to his audience, "unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did". Unless those of us who think we're not too sinful wake up and change our attitude, we will be cut off from life. Look at the Israelites, says Paul to the Corinthians. Look how God favoured them. Look how well they did all that cultic stuff. Look at how they gave up everything and followed God into the wilderness. They perished. They did all that, and they still didn't get it. Went through all the motions, albeit with a healthy dose of whinging, and never actually cottoned on that they were dealing with matters of life and death.

And here we are, all these centuries later, going through the motions, hearing the story, having our season of repentance, and in just as much danger, if not more, of thinking the whole thing is an exercise in humility or piety or self-flagellation, when all the time our very lives depend on it. Unless we repent, we will be the living dead. Our lives will be dead, and our deaths will be deader. For how can we be alive when our faces are turned inward, how can we live when our backs are turned to the source of life? Repentance is not really interested in what we are turning from. Repentance is interested in what we are turning to. Look to God and look not to your own doing, bad or good. It's no use having all the latest flashiest impressive software if your hardware isn't actually plugged in. In fact even the safe, modest, sufficient unto the day software is a deception if there is no source of power, no force of life, no connection to the one who gives in abundance.

This is why the message from Isaiah is so critical, and so urgent for those of us steeped in established tradition, right doctrine, protestant work ethic, intellectual excellence, human management and economic control. Because for Isaiah the idea of repenting from our sin is secondary, derivative, almost an afterthought. What Isaiah does is proclaim what we are invited to. He is more interested in telling us that there is something so much better to be had than in dwelling on our failings.

And he does this because he knows that is where God is coming from too. Stop wasting your time on things that are ultimately futile. Stop substituting them for what will really bring you to life. Come! All is prepared! Come! No entry fee. No tickets required. No rationing. No limits. Come and delight in unconditional abundance. Come live! God waits with open arms to welcome you, to embrace you, to feed you full as a goob. If you thought you were here to repent of your sins, think again. Turn the invitation over. Turn towards the good stuff. Lent is a time to set aside all those things that distract us with false promise, fast, abstain from the world's deceiving luxuries, and enjoy the joy of being alive, truly alive, in God.

To God be glory for ever.
