

Easter 5  
18/5/2014

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

### The great work of the church

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“Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”

Are these not very surprising, even troubling, words? For, I suspect that the natural response of most of us will be: *No*, we do not do as Jesus did. Keeping our eyes just on John’s gospel, we might list the works of Jesus as things like this: he turned water into wine; he healed a man born blind; he healed a lame man; he raised Lazarus from death.

Given what we have heard him say this morning, our immediate thought would then be that this is just the kind of thing we too are expected to perform. And, given that we don’t see a lot of this in the life of the church today, the next step will then be to accuse ourselves or others for, if Jesus is right, something must have gone wrong: we do not have enough faith, are not spiritual enough, or are not obedient enough in order to be able to exercise the power which Jesus exercised, the power to do “great works”.

Now, we may indeed be faithless, or without the Spirit, or disobedient. We may indeed not be doing the things which Jesus does. But if that is the case then we must at least understand *why* we are failing, *what it is* we are failing to do or to understand.

To summarise where we’ll be going – whereas we might wonder about why we do not have the *power* to do as Jesus did, in fact the problem lies in that we operate with a different *purpose* than Jesus did. And so, even if we had power perform the kinds of miracles we see in the gospels, it would do us no good.

The first step to take in coming to such a conclusion is to reconsider: what actually *were* the works which Jesus did? When Jesus comes actually to *talk* about the work he came to do, things like the miracles we listed a moment ago don’t feature at all. According to Jesus, *the work of Jesus the Son is to make God the Father known*.

“No one has ever seen God,” John declares in his opening prologue, “the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” (1.18). We hear this kind of thing repeated again and again in John’s gospel: the things of the Father have been entrusted in their entirety to the Son (5.22), who thereby brings the Father to the world. “If you knew me, you would know my Father also” (8.19); “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14.8). Jesus attends not to his own agenda, but to that of the Father (5.19, 8.38; 12.48-50; 14.10; 17.8); he speaks what he has heard from the Father, and his word is the Father’s (8.25-28, 14.24, 15.15)

Whereas *our* focus typically falls on the *power* to do great works (or our apparent lack of such power as a church), Jesus’ focus is on the *purpose* of the works – the revelation of the Father.

Now this is not to rule out the possibility of such miracles still happening today, but it is to say that miracles in themselves aren't the point. In the understanding of John the Evangelist, miracles are *signs*: things which point *beyond* themselves, first to Jesus, and through him to the Father who sent him.

It may indeed be the case that Christ's church doesn't do the works that Jesus did, and certainly not greater works than he did. Yet this is not because we lack miraculous power. It is rather because we easily imagine that miraculous power is what it is all about. We might not cast it in terms of *miraculous* power; in a denomination like ours, at least, we imagine ourselves too "mature" and "progressive" to expect miracles! We are more likely to cast it in terms of other secondary things. The power we seek might be social (becoming a welcoming community), or aesthetic (a certain style of building or music), or cultural (cleverly, even cunningly, manipulating the icons of the age) or political (seeking to make a high profile impact in the surrounding community). We look for the "hook" which will re-catch all those fish which have escaped the net of the church.

Again our denomination's current "Major Strategic Review" comes to mind, instigated as it is by the changing fortunes of the church and, mostly unconsciously, thinking about its responsibility in terms of the fundamentally military category of strategy. We as a congregation must also be mindful of these dynamics as we contemplate the major challenges which confront us on this site.

The question which arises for the church from this text is not in the first instance, "why do you not have the power, have the magic?" but "do you know what the magic is?" In terms of our text, the question can be put this way: "are you willing to let your work as individuals and a church to be simply to continue with Jesus' work of making the Father known?"

Now the problem here is *not* that which some have with the name "Father"; I have said something about this theme on another occasion.<sup>1</sup> The question is about whether Jesus' own task of making known the one who sent him is sufficient also for us today. Are we willing to trust the future of the church to such a seemingly impotent, apparently irrelevant, action? This is a question we must answer, at least if we imagine ourselves somehow to be the church of Christ.

Of course, I haven't said anything specific about what this might look like in our life as a church. In fact it may not be possible from surface features to distinguish between the church which longs after lost power and the church which properly understands its purpose, in John's terms. The church whose purpose is to continue to work in the Spirit for the revealing of the Father will necessarily have social and aesthetic and cultural and political dimensions. There is nothing in all this to say that we ought not to be seeking to act in socially and politically affective ways. A danger here is that we might imagine that the church's business is merely theological and not particularly connected to the world's needs: the injection of a bit of theology into the secular world. Nothing could be further from the truth. The revelation of God as Father is the revelation of ourselves as God's children, sharing in the relationship which Jesus himself enjoys with the one who sent him. This is the revelation of our fundamental character as loved and free. What else do we need to know about ourselves? What else do we need to set us free for mercy and justice in a merciless and unjust world?

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon Feb 23, 2014;

<http://www.marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/sermons/2014/20140223.pdf>

But what looks like freedom for justice may not necessarily be true freedom. The church whose “greater work” is the revelation of the Father will differ from the power-seeking church in the way that being led differs from being driven. It will differ in the way that hope differs from optimism. It will differ in the way that the uncertain differ from the anxious in the face of the same threat. And it will differ in the way that getting radical differs from becoming reactionary.

I don't think it an unfair thing to state that the Uniting Church in general seems more driven than led, more optimistic than hopeful, more anxious than uncertain, more reactionary than radical.

Drivenness, optimism, anxiety and reaction are what we will see developing in ourselves if we imagine that Jesus was effective because he had a great bag of tricks, and now, in his absence, *if only* we knew where that he left that bag!

But the effectiveness of Jesus was in his trust in the one who sent him, in his being willing to point to the Father, and to be named by the Father's pointing back to him, “Son”. It is the to-ing and fro-ing between the Father and the Son which is the reason we are gathered here today. *This* is the extraordinary thing about the church – its existence arises out of something so impractical, so un-strategic, as the relationship between the Father and the Son in heart of God. And because this is the source of its life, it is also what its life is to be – a sharing in that pointing to and from God.

And so Jesus says to us in our anxious reactions to our apparent powerlessness in the world, *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. Do and be as I have done and been. What I am, and what I have done, is the way to the Father, the way to the truth and the life you so earnestly seek. If you know me, you will know the Father also. Just so, you will finally know yourselves as his.*

May the one who promised this send us his Spirit that we may indeed be where he is,  
and that the Father may thereby be glorified in him.

Amen.

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