

Pentecost 19
19/10/2014

Mark the Evangelist

1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:12

Psalm 133

Matthew 22:15-22

Telling the Time

Many of you probably remember the days when our churches – at least the parent churches of the UCA – did not use lectionaries for Sunday readings. Any system for choosing what to read in worship has its strengths and weaknesses and, whatever might be among the weaknesses of not using a lectionary, *having* a lectionary is not without its problems either.

One problem is that we rarely hear the whole of any scriptural book but rather a series of discrete selections. We use only selections, in part, because of how large the biblical text is. Given how long it would take to hear the whole biblical text in worship, and given also that we don't really *want* to hear particular bits in worship, we try to identify the "important bits" and leave the rest to study groups or private devotions.

There is a more subtle problem with lectionaries, however, which is not so much about what to read, but when. Our lectionary cycles through the ecumenical church year, beginning Advent and moving through Christmas and Epiphany to Lent, Easter, Pentecost and then on to the feast of Christ the King. The time of the year tells us what to read. At *this* time of the year, working towards Advent, the New Testament texts begin to edge towards texts about the end-times. The Thessalonian letters – known for their interest in the coming Day of the Lord – appear in the lectionary at this time of the year; the last two readings in the RCL selections from 1 Thessalonians this year have to do with the resurrection of the dead and final Day of the Lord, after which we have Christ the King (Reign of Christ) – another end-time theme – and then Advent with its God-is-coming focus.

Pedagogically, this kind of reading makes good sense – everything is taught through a cycle, and in the right place in the cycle, and then repeated. Theologically, however, there is a significant problem, quite different from the fact that the lectionary leaves out lots of bits of the biblical text: in a cyclic lectionary it is the time which tells us what text to read, as distinct from the texts we read telling us what time it is. Christmas tells us to read Christmas stories, Easter to read Easter stories, Advent to read "God is coming" texts, and so on. The effect is to make the hearing of the Scriptures a thoroughly *predictable* experience. So we're reading 1 Thessalonians? It must be nearly Advent!

The theological problem here is that the biblical testimony is domesticated, or tamed by, our concerns with reading the right things at the right time. The effect is that in the reading of the Scriptures we will be attuned to hearing what we expect to hear. In this the reading of the Scriptures becomes more an act of self-expression – expression of ourselves and our concerns in our sense of what time it is – and less a self-expression of God.

What difference does this make? The difference between whether it is us speaking or God speaking is the difference between everything staying the same and the possibility that something new might happen.

As I wondered recently about how to “preach out” the end of the year –thereby proving myself thoroughly time-bound in the way I’ve just criticised! – I noted the set readings from 1 Thessalonians and thought they would “do” as a focus. But as I read them as a whole they seemed not simply to be about what I had imagined from what I thought I already knew about the letter (that is, it’s nearly Advent, so eschatology-and-all-that).

As you read the letter as a whole it reveals an extraordinary “heart”– not heart in the sense of “centre” but heart as “feeling”, an effusive bubbling-over of joy and celebration by Paul of the Thessalonian church:

“We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1.2)

“... You became imitators of us and of the Lord..., an example to all the believers...”

“... The word of the Lord has sounded forth from you... in every place where your faith in God has become known...”

“... the people [of Macedonia and Achaia]... report about us what kind of welcome we had among you and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God...”

And so Paul goes on, recounting the ministry he and his co-workers brought, and how the Thessalonians had responded, concluding with:

“So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.”

What we have in the letter – as a letter – is a deeply personal exchange between the apostle and the faith community his ministry has created. To get back to where we started this morning, this exchange reflects a ministry which does not so much *respond* to the times as *creates* time, or a creates a particular type of time – a time determined by a certain quality of relationship.

Paul and his missionary team found their way to Thessalonica, not knowing what they would find there – quite without any reference to the times as anyone might have been able to read them. And they preached and worked and met and encouraged, and a small congregation was established. In that engagement new connections were made, new relationships were created – the times were changed. And changed permanently. After Paul and his team left, the Thessalonian church continued, and so did the strength of relationship between them. The letter is the sign of this, as is the return of Timothy a little later to check in on the young church (of which we will hear next week).

And the times were not changed only for them but also for us, for here we are nearly two thousand years later, being affected by that missionary work and the relationships it set in place. This is what happens when the untimeliness of God’s word meets our sense of the “right” (so we think) time: the course of our history changes.

“So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.”

This is not sentimentality on Paul’s part. It is the effect of the gospel on those who willingly receive it from each other – on those whose time is shifted by God’s re-creative touch.

This is to be our work, and what we are to expect, if we are the people of a crucified God – a God who calls into being things which are not, who raises the dead.

Our times today? In the world around us war and terror wax large again; disease trickles into our once safely-distant hide-aways from the harsh realities of so many others in this torn world. Violence on the streets late at night, ice in the veins of young people. These are the times taking care of themselves – the world reading the texts which it imagines the times require: violent texts for violent times, self-justifying texts in response to injustice, escapist texts for frightening times.

In the churches we have our own version of this: anxiety for the future of the church, having read the “signs of the times”, an over-emphasis on ordinary time and its signs. Perhaps we long for a different time but we seem to have little idea about how to reset our watches.

What we hear from Paul and his friends from so long ago is not some ancient enthusiasm, the time of which is now past. What we hear is the possibility that time can be experienced not as pre-determined – as tying our hands, as forcing us to act in particular ways – but as open to new and unexpected possibilities which open us up to each other as God opens himself up to us.

Later in our hearing of the letter we will hear from Paul an exhortation which sums up this sense of being in our time differently from what it would see to demand:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (5.16-18)

It is not simply the “will” of God that we live this way, as a thing commanded among other commands. This is the means by which we experience our times as changed, for in this way we mark them as different from how they might seem: an occasion for rejoicing, a looking forward to God’s resolving of time’s tensions, the receipt of the time we have as a gift out of which anything can be created.

The possibility that the world might be changed through our experiencing it in surprisingly different ways – this is the gift and call of the gospel.

Let us desire to be a people leading “a life worthy of God” (2.12) – learning to tell the time by what God can do with a broken world, and living accordingly – to God’s greater glory and our richer humanity. Amen.
