

Epiphany 2
18/1/2015

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 3:1-10
Psalm 139
John 1:43-51

Sermon preached by Rev. Kim Groot

Christmas holiday catch-ups with old friends invariably involve discussion of the puzzling deterioration of our bodies since we last saw each other. Like Old Eli's, our eyes are dimming and our hearing dulling. Fortunately, none of us has as much reason as Eli to lose hope in our children, but over the summer break, there was a fair bit of despair expressed about the way the future appears to be taking shape internationally and in Australia. Opinions were shared about short-sighted decisions, anticipated consequences, and what appears to be wilful deafness to the views of experts and him and her in the street. Disturbingly, in these conversations, there was an overwhelming silence about the state of the church – not a single word. People who once sat in church pews now seem not to give the church a second thought.

Of course, Eli's circumstances are not described just to share how things are with him and his family. Eli's dull eyes and the poor behaviour of his sons signal Israel's prospects. Eli reflects the situation in the temple over which he presides; not only does he turn a blind eye to his sons' misconduct, visions are not common and the word of the Lord is rare. Eli will be judged for his impaired oversight of the temple: he has allowed the things of God to grow dim; he represents the paths Israel has followed, blind to the ways of God and deaf to his voice.

Eli's sons, therefore, embody the dead end that Israel has reached as God's people; they show no respect for the temple and use its worship only to satisfy their own desires. There is little likelihood that the faith which Eli received from his father will thrive in his badly behaved sons or those who come after them. (For those who fear we are seeing the end of the church as we know it in the western world, the judgment on Eli may sit uncomfortably.)

It's no accident that this story takes place at night. The darkness represents the same reality as Eli's deteriorating sight.

Yet there is a glimmer of hope. We are told that "the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was."

The lamp of God and the ark both are signs of the presence of God in the sanctuary. In the midst of the darkness of failing vision and the night that has descended over Israel, the flame of God's presence is still burning.

And in the darkness there is Samuel, the miracle child born to a barren woman. Samuel's birth is one of the many births whereby God makes the impossible possible; also, in keeping with these miracle births is the obedience of Samuel's mother. Hannah trusted God and kept her promise to bring her son to the temple – she is, in fact, a woman who is precisely what God looks for from Israel. Hannah knows that without God, there is nothing.

So, lying in the darkness is the hope of God, just waiting for God's presence to fan it into a new flame. We are reminded again that the word of the Lord was rare in those days, but this child of God hears God's voice, even though he doesn't know whose voice he is hearing – but Eli is still sufficiently a man of Israel's God to point the way for the realisation of Israel's future; Eli still recognises the signature of Israel's God and knows to tell Samuel who is calling and what his response should be.

This is not a story about the old making way for the new, in the trite way that we so often hear it's necessary. We are exhaustingly sold this line in almost every aspect of our lives: update, upgrade, renovate, make-over, make-under, overhaul ... This story is not even about the old ushering in the new - facilitating the upgrade.

The movement from Eli to Samuel does mark the beginning of a new era in Israel's covenantal narrative and Eli does enable that transition, but it's not the essential point. The time of Samuel will one day come to an end very similar to that of Eli and his sons. Samuel's sons will be just as worthless as Eli's and Samuel too will be faced with the judgment of God, will preside over another change in Israel's history and will anoint David as Israel's first king.

This story is part of the ongoing narrative of God's relentless reaching out to his covenant people, about the plasticity of God's will, his unwavering faithfulness in seeking to speak to Israel's heart and have Israel know itself his people, know his voice and be conformed to his will.

This relentless pursuit of humanity by God, of course, reaches its fulfilment in God's radical act of incarnation. The Word becomes flesh and dwells in the world in Nazareth – the same Nazareth that Nathanael is so cheekily sceptical about in today's gospel reading. John's reference to Nazareth's poor reputation underlines the radical nature of the Word in the world; as he has brought to birth a prophet out of barrenness, so God makes his way towards Israel's heart not from a position of influence, but from a disreputable city, in a region known for putting its hopes in false Messiahs.

Nathanael's mischievous scepticism doesn't disqualify him from discipleship; in fact, Jesus pays him the compliment of saying he's an Israelite without deceit – without guile, in older translations. While this compliment might appeal to those of us with cheeky minds, a more persuasive view of this remark is as a reference to the patriarch Jacob – subsequently renamed Israel – an Israelite surely defined by his deceit. Does Jesus see Nathanael, in contrast to cunning old Jacob, as a 'true' Israelite when he comes to him? Is Nathanael Israel writ faithful?

That Philip tells Nathanael, "we have found him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote" is a fair indication that Philip knew Nathanael as a true seeker of the Messiah. So when Nathanael comes to Jesus from under the fig tree, he bears the fruit which God has looked for from Israel and is sceptical no longer: he names Jesus "Son of God" and "King of Israel".

Jesus neither confirms nor denies the names Philip and Nathanael call him; he does say that they don't yet know the full reality of who he is, that they will see even greater things. In John's gospel, this greatness is the glory of Christ crucified – a greatness Philip and Nathanael could never have anticipated. It is by way of the cross that the breach will finally be healed between Israel and Israel's God, between earth and heaven.

The promise of angels ascending and descending is another reminder of the patriarch Jacob; deceitful as he was, Jacob was given to see in a dream what disciples from the earliest until now are given to see in the person of Jesus Christ – namely, the reconciliation of all things.

There is an international conference in Rome in early March to which anyone interested is invited – although applications closed on Friday. It aims to focus on the renewal of the church in a secular age. While seeking to address issues facing the Catholic Church, particularly the disenchantment of its membership, those issues nevertheless are not unrelated to those facing the whole church.

At first glance, the 4 areas to be explored seem very helpful – and even more helpful to my mind because they correspond to something of what we have heard in this morning's readings: listening, discerning, welcoming and serving. It will be interesting to see what the conference reports about its consideration of the dynamics of western secularism, how it discerns the signs of the times and the impact of technology, and so on.

It would be a pity if the conference were driven by anxiety about the future,. An agenda which primarily seeks to keep our fears at bay is rarely productive. Today's readings - and indeed the biblical witness as a whole – leads us to confess that our only hope for the future – the future of creation and the future of the Church – is in the God who creates out of nothing, who brings into being what otherwise does not exist. This is why we listen to him. This is why we come and see. This is why we bear witness. This is the only way we serve the world as we are called to do – by placing our trust in the one who is ever faithful.

The prophet Samuel, a child born in barrenness, declares the fruitfulness of God's covenant love. The disciple Nathanael is called from under the fig tree – the suggestion surely on this occasion that it is in full fruit.

The fruitfulness of our life together in this place can only come from our listening for the Voice of God in Word and Sacrament, our discernment of this one Voice from the many voices which clamour for our attention and lead us astray, our welcome of the One who unites the things of earth with the things of heaven and our witness to him even in the darkness that threatens us - perhaps especially in the looming darkness.

We gather on behalf of the unknowing world to hear the Word spoken in the world in every moment of every day. We bear witness to this abiding presence of Christ, to his glory as the one who lived, died and lived again that the world's dark deathliness might not be the last word we hear.

Thanks be to God.
