

Easter 4
17/4/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 23
John 10:22-30

Another perspective on caring for the disadvantaged

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Gwen Ince

In our gospel reading today, the bods who hang about the temple come up to Jesus in a sort of mini ambush and let him know they're looking for answers: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

I'm guessing the people here at Mark the Evangelist know something about looking for answers, wondering how long it's going to take to decide the location and plant questions of their future, longing for an answer. UnitingCare Hotham Mission has been waiting for plain answers about its place in the structures of the Uniting church. St Albans are wondering when they'll get to meet Daniel's wife and son. Christ Church wonder most weeks if the Minister will get to church on time.

In comparison with these, questions like 'What is Hotham Mission?' or 'Are you the Messiah?' seem relatively simple. And of course that's what Jesus says to his questioners: "What are you asking me that for? I've already told you in plain Aramaic... but you don't believe me. I've already done more of God's works than you can poke a stick at, but you don't see that that answers your question. You just don't get it. Worse than that, you never will. You will never cotton on to what I am on about – or more to the point, who I am and where I come from – without a radical change of camp, a seismic shift in your assumptions, a capacity to trust me on my own terms rather than judging me on yours." Perhaps I exaggerate a little. Actually all John has Jesus saying is, "You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep."

Naturally, as readers of the text, to say nothing of long-time members of the church, we automatically understand ourselves to be amongst those who *do* belong. *We* know Jesus is the Messiah. *We know* he is, don't we? *We* know he lived our life, died our death, was raised to the right hand of God. *We* hear his voice and follow, more or less, most of the time. See that cottonwool ball I've glued to the picture – right there – that's me, gratefully grazing on the grass with all the other sheep (and even helping fertilize for the next generation).

But the colours change a bit when we jump into the Book of Revelation, and stand with the writer, as the elder points out the innumerable infinitely diverse multitude of white robed praisers of God and the Lamb spread out before us as far as the eye can see. Perhaps then there is that little moment of hesitation, that skipped heartbeat of anxiety as we scan the faces looking for our own. Or perhaps not. Perhaps we are sufficiently sure of what we know and believe that we feel no need to scrutinise our own seeing and believing, though it does make us sound dangerously like the bods in the temple if we are.

The thing is, we are told these, the white robed praisers, are they who have ‘come out of the great ordeal’, they who have ‘washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. Definitely squeamish stuff, that last bit, with the colours seriously awry. It is probably at this point that I need to thank Craig for drawing my attention to some of Rowan Williams’ thoughts in his little book, *Resurrection*, which I believe some of you have read and others might well consider reading. In this book, Williams has a go at helping us understand, or at least get some sense of how the resurrection can transform us.

The argument, as I understand it, goes something like this. Jesus, for no crime, no nasty lapse, no fault of his own, except perseverance and endurance in holding to his absolute belief in the love of the God he knew as Father, suffered an unimaginably cruel and brutal death. Definitely bloody literally. Even more so metaphorically. There is blood on the hands of those who put him to suffering, ending his life prematurely and painfully. If that were the end of it, if death were the only outcome, the stain of blood would remain indelibly there. It is, says Williams, only as Jesus’ killers are confronted with the resurrected Christ that they are able truly to see what they have done, and so have the option to turn away from death towards life, to repent, not just seeing what they are capable of, but owning what they have done and who that shows them to be, and daring to look with hope to the one who, precisely as their victim, alone can forgive them. Such forgiveness is transformation indeed, an invitation to reconciliation, to full membership in the white robed multitude, an opportunity to trust Jesus on his terms rather than judging him on their own.

So that’s the blood bit, in terrifying brevity. What about the great ordeal (and no, you’re not allowed to count sitting through this sermon as part of it)? A bit of attention to the historical context of the writer of Revelation encourages us to think that the great ordeal refers to the terrible suffering inflicted by Rome on its citizens, not least its Christians, along with the terrible devastation this kind of literature pictures as part and parcel of the anticipated bringing down of the enemy, i.e., Rome. To come through this great ordeal is to persevere and endure, holding to absolute faithfulness to God in the face of unimaginable cruelty. Or, to put it conversely, it means not compromising or collaborating with the prevailing culture of opulence and violence for one’s own protection, preservation or even positive benefit.

So what has all this to do with Hotham Mission? We live in a world, a country, where the prevailing culture is not that different from first century Rome. Of course our opulence and violence is more hidden, more subtle, more targeted, and yet all the more insidious because of that. We so easily fall into ‘too cosy a peace with the prevailing culture and political ethos’, as one writer put it. In fact, I would suggest we all have a strongly vested interest in doing just that, finding it pretty much impossible to extract ourselves.

Thus, when we reach out to those in need, we are in no position to regard ourselves as the strong helping the weak, as the ones who know how to live well guiding those who don’t, or even as the embodiment of Christ saving the lost. Rather, we are reaching out to the victims of our mutually agreed systems of self-care and convenience, as to the suffering Christ whom *they* embody. As we face those whom our systems brutalise and cast aside, and see the living they strive to do against all the odds, as we see Christ in them, we are miraculously offered the opportunity to see with renewed clarity our own complicity in their disadvantage. Only then, as we face our victims, can we seek forgiveness from Christ in them, be radically transformed, truly know Jesus on his own terms, hear his voice, and follow him.
