

Easter 2 (Mark the Evangelist Day)
23/4/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalm 2

Ephesians 4:7-8, 11-15

Mark 16:9-20

Christ our present and future

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Wes Campbell

Today the Gospel reading takes us to an End.

Or rather, to at least three endings: an abrupt ending that leaves the reader hanging, another so-called shorter ending, and a longer passage at verses 15-20. Those endings seem to be providing a missing end to the Gospel, as if its last page was torn off. Now, the consensus among New Testament scholars is that the 'unfinished sentence' of verse eight is in fact the end Mark intended. New Testament scholar Davis McCaughey, a longtime member of this congregation, and father of the Uniting Church, was an advocate of this approach. He was a supporter of the name *Mark the Evangelist* for this congregation.

Does it matter how the Gospel ends? It certainly matters. With these endings, we hear the early Christian community grappling with Jesus who announced the nearness of the reign of God, his cry of abandonment on the cross, and the Easter news carried by women. It is startling to hear, within the Easter announcement of hope, the note of fear and doubt.

Such a commanding word should bind us together: But we know only too well the varieties of interpretations brought to bear on the Gospels: from, on one hand, 'Literalists' to so-called 'Progressives'.

This is not just about interpreting texts, it takes us to the shaping of the Christian community as it addresses issues such as sexuality and war.

A colleague refuses to sing Charles Wesley's hymn: '*All praise to our redeeming Lord*' (TiS 442) because it contains verses such as

Even now we think and speak the same
And cordially agree,
Concentred all, through Jesus' name
In perfect harmony.

It's just not true that we have the same mind, he says.

And it is also that many have given up on the church, and any expectation that we will be changed.

The collapse of faith we have lived in the past century eats away at us. Consider the remarkable ABC programs on space-watching. There was a viewing of the cosmos - a vast spread of galaxies. Scientific commentators told us that we were looking at the beginning of time. The sense of awe in the presenters was palpable, as was also the lack of theology.

The science of the last century took over the notion of entropy, and the notion that the galaxy is winding down. The German theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865 – 1925) accepted the view that the universe was like a battery failing. The future would consist of the last person sitting in front of the last coal, roasting the last potato, in the light of the dying sun. The cosmos was therefore closed and fading.

For Troeltsch then, the future was lost, not least because these were also the years of the calamitous End brought about in the great slaughter of the First World War. And although this was to be ‘war to end all wars’, only decades later was Europe aflame with its death camps; and the cry ‘never again’.

With the atomic demolition of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, then nuclear tests on Pacific atolls, Maralinga, Three Mile Island, Japanese Fukushima, Chernobyl. came an End overshadowed by the nuclear cloud.

Such is the End we experience.

According to Francis Fukuyama with the fall of the Soviet Union we came to the end of history; monetarist economics had won the day. Far from the optimism of Fukuyama’s vision another declaration of the end came from the Russian journalist, Svetlana Alexieich (in *Chernobyl Prayer*, 1997). She announces an unseen radioactive threat that will last for thousands of years. The Russian author brought many voices to speech, telling of the agonizing deaths. She asked ‘who can we look to for the future?’ Her answer, ‘no-one’.

With that loss, which, paradoxically lasts for centuries, we are tempted to lose hope. And intertwined with the nuclear threat is the emergence of ‘terrorism’ between the so-called people of the book, Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The roots of this troubled world reach back into mechanized warfare, in the nineteenth century. Millions of young men, promised glory and adventure, were cut down by a hail of lead, or became in trenches the living dead.

Recalling the slaughter, certain dates shape us: 25th April ANZAC, and the Twin Towers of 9/11. Around the globe neighbours are turned into figures of fear.

We might be tempted to look wistfully backwards to a supposed peaceful age. Where many speak of ‘the end’: the texts we have opened this morning promise a new future.

How are we to live in a world that is grieving its past?

In that field of loss, we Christians are pressed to ask about hope.

This is the time when God is silent, dead as attested by voices such as Nietzsche, AC Drayling, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins. If God is absent, away, in exile, where shall we look for hope and life?

Jacques Ellul who took as one of his titles ‘*Hope in a time of abandonment* (1976) gives us a clue. He says it is not for us to try to spring across the gulf between the unseen God and our seen world. No, rather, as Jesus cried out in abandonment and was answered only by the Spirit, we too are to wait in abandonment. We must be profoundly aware that we do not have the means for crossing the gulf; the only thing we can do is trust that the God who raises the dead, will come to us to make us whole.

Consider the *Letter to the Ephesians* probably circulated in the Roman Empire late in the first century. There we are introduced to a number of small communities who are living out a radically new way. Where once those who differed were in conflict, this correspondence advises how new life can be shaped; between man and woman, adults

and children, slaves and free. A new relationship has emerged between those who differ. Difference is no longer a reason for conflict. Rather the Christian community is where enemies are reconciled, living out a newly discovered peace. This involves a stepping out of line in the Empire. Instead of 'Pax Romana', maintained by the sword, there is a new story being told here.

The writer of the letter sees in these early Christians a pointer to the cosmos as a whole. Once powers held the cosmos in bondage. Now something new has happened which enlivens the whole cosmos. The fact of this new Christian community, gives us a vision of a totally renewed cosmos. The future is intruding into our present, and the letter that turns enemies into friends draws us into that open future.

How crucial is such a vision, when our streets are given over to soldiers and veterans, to weapons that are 'the mother of all bombs', nuclear warheads are kept in storage for possible use, where the economics of our nations are dependent upon the trade in armaments.

As we read the letter, it must cross our mind that we are reading the letter some 2000 years after it was written. And for 1500 years we have learned to read the letter in ways that erodes that radical reading. We are taught to accept our place in ritualized prayer and politics.

The question is this: will we trust the future that is pressing onto us?

Like the first Christians who heard of the risen One, and faced fear and trembling and doubt, our task is not to reassert religious language. We are certainly not to re-construct the empire. Nor are we to fit into the world to the present. There is something far more radical going on here in the God who comes to renew the whole cosmos.

Then we will be able to trust, with the Gospeller Mark, the God who is given over to abandonment, yet can bring life from nothing.

Then it will make sense to sing, with Charles Wesley:

He bids us build each other up;
And gathered into one,
To our high calling's glorious hope,
We hand in hand go on.

(TiS 442)

The point here is this: in Christ the future and the present are bound together. The Risen Christ who has made his claim on the future, also claims us for his present. Here an end is put to violent and destructive ways; and the very particles of the cosmos are witnesses to Jesus Christ, the end and the future, the centre and the far flung boundary of life.

And to him, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all thanks, praise and glory, in his work of renewing the whole cosmos. AMEN
