

Advent 1
3/12/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80
Mark 13:24-37

Hope and Prayer

Every day we read, we hear, something new in the news: some new political furore, the unprecedented weather event, the surprise that *he* is suddenly outed as an abuser, or that she was abused, the economic bubble or burst, the bomb blast.

Yet, in this way, so also is the news pretty much always the same. There is a persistent staleness about the newness of the news. The same *kinds* of things keep happening, if in ever-changing form. And we respond to them in the same kinds of ways. Royal Commissions, witch hunts, further regulation, lower (or higher) taxes, better medication, more surveillance. We are ever active, ever responding, although always with the same kind of response because it is the same kinds of things to which we are reacting.

We can “dress” this experience with the colourful language of Isaiah’s lament this morning: “we have become like one who is unclean”. The sense of the text is almost certainly of the ritual uncleanliness described in the religious law, but it remains the case, even in a secular context, that we are unable to wash ourselves of the things which cling to us, which require constant scrubbing, which keep us busy and distracted and weary.

It is out of this experience that there springs the extraordinary lament which opened today’s text from Isaiah: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”. For what else could heal us?

In the text, this bidding springs from a recollection of the past, although not in any nostalgic sense. It is not that there was a golden age, a “good old days” to which they long to return. Nostalgia is delusional escapism, of which the Scriptures can never be accused. Longing for yesterday gets us nowhere because it forgets that, even if things felt better back then, that “then” is what delivered us the present in which we now live, whether the present of the church or of society more generally. The past for which we might long was the seed of what we now long to escape.

The prophet recalls instead God’s working of “awesome things *we did not expect*”. What has been lost is not the golden past, but the unexpectedness of God. It is only in the presence and action of this one that the world breaks out of the cycles of stale newness.

And so what is required is not more manipulation of the world around us, but prayer such as we hear in the prophet today. What we seek is something which cannot be rightly expected, something we don’t know how to tease into reality. Hope is not concerned with what we can see or touch or even imagine, for these are the very things which bind us. Hope springs from the *unexpectedly* new, the unseen, the unknown.

The text dresses with this reality in language we scarcely dare entertain today, convinced as we are of God's boundless love and, so, of the *easy* access we have to God. But we must take seriously the prophet's declaration that God has "hidden" himself: "for you have hidden your face from us."

Whatever else this means, it means that prayer is not a kind of spiritual "technology:" not a thing we need to do, in just the right kind of way with just the right words and condition of heart, in order to get God to act as we would like. "About that day or hour, no one knows", we have heard in the gospel reading today, making the same point: God cannot be calculated. The hiddenness of God – that God has hidden *himself* – is God's inaccessibility on any terms other than God's own.

If this is the case, then what we need for the radically new and refreshing is not better science, more open hearts or gentler politics. None of these should be scoffed at, but they are appeals to variations in the *quantity* of what we think we have or need. The prayer of Isaiah today is a prayer for something of a different *quality*.

And this different quality is marked by a different *method*: a different orientation and expectation and so a different way of being. It is a humble waiting on God in the "fervent breath of prayer," as our closing hymn puts it. As prayer, it is *not* inactive or passive. There is much we can do, not so much "in addition to prayer" as *giving body* to our prayers. We do not pray "and" act. Our prayers are surely actions, for in this way we mark before the world that we need more than we can say or do, and our actions are surely prayers, for in this way we show to God how we desire things to be and seek more of it.

Advent is not about "waiting" for God, as if at any other time of the year we are not waiting. It brings to the fore the character of our relationship with God as one of grace, in which things unexpected or unmerited are given, that we might live. This characterises all Christian existence as marked by hope, embodied in prayer and action. God has acted, and so we pray, and God acts, and we pray.

So, let us pray...
