

Pentecost 23
17/11/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 65:17-25

Isaiah 12

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-9

Where God's Presence Goes

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

*God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not.
Amen.*

It begins in a temple. Where the wind meets the sea.

Where light and dark, sea and sky, water and earth, are set in their place.

Where there is a place for buying animals, and a place to sacrifice them; a court for Gentiles, and a court for Jews.

It begins in a temple.

It begins in a temple. Filled with the breath of life.

Filled with lanterns to guide our path; teeming with fish and birds, creatures of kinds beyond kinds, and our humanity among them.

Filled with conversation in the marketplace, teaching and prayer, devotion and piety and praise.

It begins in a temple.

And God was there. Where the wind meets the sea. Filling it all with the breath of life.

But then the world of order descended into chaos. There was a war, and wars after wars. And the Jewish people lost. Placed under foreign occupation, sent into exile, returned ... placed again under foreign occupation, and eventually crushed.

And the temple?

Years upon years, history has marched on. The temple mount in Jerusalem remains in ruins, the site of bitter conflict ... and creation is on fire. The teeming life of fish and birds is at risk; the sea is reclaiming the land; our places of worship are literally and metaphorically crumbling; from where will the prayer and praise and devotion come?

The temple has been torn down.

Is God there ... anymore?

“By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

These are the words of Jesus that we are left with at the end of today's Gospel reading. Our Gospel reading recalls the culmination of the defeat of the Jewish resistance by the occupying Roman army: the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. This defeat continued as the Jewish religious movement which would become Christianity began to spread throughout the empire. Moving from the temple to houses, this new movement was met by persecution as it grew.

Luke's Gospel does not recall these stories of defeat, destruction, and death as memories of long ago. Rather, the Gospel gathers contemporary experiences into the prophetic words of Jesus. Like all good prophets Jesus is not a seer who peers into the future, but is a voice calling out what is true behind the veil of history and the present world.

The words of Jesus pierce through the intervening years between Jesus' earthly life and the communion of Luke's audience as the Spirit-filled body of Christ.

Luke's original audience knew what it meant that they met in a house, no longer able to worship in a destroyed temple. They knew what it meant to be members of a movement where their spiritual siblings were being killed. And so when we step back to see Luke's Gospel alongside Luke's other work, the book of Acts, we can see how the text tells the story of Jesus, while also structuring the story to make sense of the experience of early Christians and catch them up in the ongoing work of God in the world. The Gospel of Luke begins and ends in the temple; and the book of Acts moves from the temple to a house, and then to the furthest reaches of the world.

What is at stake in Luke's two-volume work is nothing less than the coming to fruition of Isaiah's vision of a new creation. When we step back to see how Luke takes us from the temple — which served as a symbol of God's heavenly palace — to local places of worship in houses, to the ends of the Earth, we begin to see how Luke compresses the biggest stories Scripture has to tell into the person of Jesus.

Whether we are talking about creation and new creation, God's promised liberation of Israel, the reconciliation of all nations or the tender presence of God to those who worship, Luke brings these all together in Jesus himself — it is telling, after all, that Luke's genealogy of Jesus goes back to the very first human, *adam*, and ultimately to God.

What holds together the cosmic vision of Isaiah, the destruction of the temple, and the endurance of the persecuted is the central thread of God's presence in the midst of hardship.

God is present in Jesus as he walks the road to the cross.

God is present with Isaiah in the midst of exile — sustaining the hope for a renewal of creation and the return home.

God is present with the first audiences of Luke, as they formed new communities in the face of persecution.

We should be wary of too easily reading our experiences back into the ancient texts we call Scripture. As if the concerns of a church in modern urban Australia can be simply read into the wise reflections of writers in the Ancient Near East. As if the experiences of people under foreign military occupation, facing exile and persecution, can be identified with our situation. In our situation we find ourselves members of a religious movement that has significantly shaped the majority culture of our colonial society.

This wariness about reading our situation back into the texts of Scripture is not simply a reflection on the incongruence, or implausibility of connecting our direct life experiences with those recorded in Scripture.

At the heart of what it means to receive Scripture is precisely to be bound in some sort of continuity with the people and communities that gave us these texts: to

see our God in their experiences of God; to see our experience of the Spirit in their experience of the Spirit.

In other words, what makes Scripture so central, what makes our sacred texts so vital to the life of faith isn't that our lives look like the lives witnessed to in these stories. But that our God is reflected in these stories, the same Spirit we encounter breathed these words into being. This is to say, we should read Scripture not to find ourselves, but first of all to find and be found by God.

It is from the centre point of an encounter with God, who we meet fully in the person of Jesus, that our connection with one another here, and our connection with the writers and first audiences of these texts opens up. What binds us together as a community of faith across time and place is not that we share an old book, but that we share the living presence of the same Spirit, and the same Risen Christ. It is Christ and Christ alone, by the power of the Spirit, that constitutes our unity.

At the end of it all, what should strike us about the talk of calamity in our reading from Luke isn't simply that it gives voice to the experience of some Christians, though this is important. Rather, the talk of calamity prepares us for the coming betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion of Jesus.

The promise of God's presence in the midst of difficulty is assured because God in Christ willingly goes into the midst of hardship. God chooses to be present even among the crucified, even among the dead. Because of this fact, that Jesus is present even where we think God cannot go: into the place of death beyond life, we are assured of God's presence wherever we are.

The centre point of the cross gathers the calamities experienced by the faithful through time and place, it gathers the experiences of persecution into the experience of the one who is himself God. And from this centre point opens up a tomb, the place of death, and from it comes life; and cascading from the risen Christ is the outpoured Spirit which remains with us.

Not a book, or a building. It is this Spirit which remains with us, makes Christ present for us. Which calls us out to seek the God who creates new life out of death, and gives life to the whole of creation.

Because God acts in Christ to go where we once thought God could not go, we are assured of God's presence even in the midst of calamity. It is this act which creates the new temple: us, you and me. It is this Spirit who forms us into the body of Christ.

Even as the sea is reclaiming the land; and our places of worship crumble, still we can say: And God was there. Where the wind meets the sea. Filling us all with the breath of life.
