

Advent 1
29/11/2020

Mark the Evangelist

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

Remembering when God will come

In a sentence

Faith perceives that God is the heart of all we desire, and trusts that God will realise this God-shaped longing

With a passion strange to many of us, the prophet cries to God: Come, save, restore. ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down’ (64.1). ‘Save us, Lord, from our enemies’ (64.2), ‘save us from ourselves’ (64.5).

The implication in that cry, of course, is that God is absent, or has turned away, or hidden Godself from the people (64.5,7). This being the case, we are alone. More than just alone, we are *stalled* until God should be revealed again, until the sky which divides heaven and earth is torn and not so much *God’s* will as our *own* desire for healing is met on earth, when heaven comes to restore us.

The prophet expresses deep longing, deep guilt, utter helplessness and confident hope in our text today. If we seek honesty in our own lives, we might learn from him here. For we are those for whom it is easy to shake off responsibility or take it on too seriously. We are those for whom it is easy to fall into despair or to entertain dreams and visions of utopian futures we can’t achieve but which we will at least pursue until they crush us or others. The prophet expresses the complexity of living into the next step when it cannot be the same as the step we have just taken and we can’t know it is the *right* step but doing the right thing is at stake.

This challenge is beginning to press in on us here at Mark the Evangelist as we come to the conclusion of a long period of reflection on what to do about the condition of some of our buildings here in North Melbourne. The conclusion to which the church council has come is that we cannot sustain our presence here and that, by implication, the sale of the property is the next big step in the life of the congregation. We might well pray at this point ‘O that you would tear open the heavens, Lord, and fix this all up for us.’

If we were ask of Isaiah what to do here, part of the answer would be that we understand our situation. The prophet knows what the people are able – and *not* able – to do. We too need to get our heads and our hearts around this. The work done over the last 7 years, in particular, has been oriented towards such an understanding. For those of us who prefer the future to be rather like the past, the outlook is not good. Yet, it is also seemingly unavoidable. We do ourselves no favours in denying this, in laying blame, or in simply ‘wishing’ it were not so and hiding ourselves away. We would trivialise the experience of those people in exile to whom Isaiah wrote if we compared our lot to theirs but it is similar at least in the sense that neither staying where we are nor going back are options for us.

In some respects, this aspect of our situation is easy: we can’t purchase what we can’t afford and so – to the extent that our future *is* about what we can afford – we must ‘buy’ something other than these buildings. There seems to be no *decision* required here as to

whether we can extend our past at Curzon Street into a future at Curzon Street; that looks to be more or less determined for us by the balance sheets. We must ‘simply’ understand that this is the case and, by the grace of God, become reconciled to it.

There will be disappointment here but we mustn’t let it wither into cynicism. The cynic is frozen in her disappointment and in the dream which is now lost. In contrast, the prophet expresses no cynicism but rather hope – remembering the surprise God has been to the people in times past. He looks forward to God’s coming and a new future for the people by looking *back* to when God ‘did awesome deeds we did not expect’ (64.3). In the same way, the church looks forward to God’s future presence by looking back to God’s having already come. Advent is not about God *still* being on the way, as if God is now very, very much overdue. Advent is a season of Easter and so Advent remembers a coming of God which gathers up all divine arrivals, past and future.

How God comes to the world is shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This means that Isaiah’s prayer in our text today can be read as pointing towards Jesus, although not quite in the way of ‘foretelling’ something yet to come. For it is also the case that every prayer for the coming of God uttered *since* Jesus points *back* to him as a kind of ‘reverse prophecy’. It is, then, perhaps better to say that God’s presence to the world in Jesus points *back* to Isaiah, and *forward* to us, and *beyond* us into the future which awaits us. As Isaiah puts it – what we think we see and hear and perceive *is always this God* (64.4).

This shift – that God is the deepest desire in all our desires – shifts us radically in our perception of our situation. We can no longer allow that our circumstances dictate who we are; we are not our buildings, we are not the way-we-have-always-done-it; the church is more than her comfort zones, more than we have yet heard, perceived, seen.

This is to discover that there is nothing radically new in what confronts us now at Mark the Evangelist. It might be disappointing, it is certainly inconvenient and will most likely be more hard work but, in the light of the gospel, it is not *new*. We are reminded here that we are – *and properly have always been* – clay in the potter’s hand, the work of God, and not the work of our own hands, as much as we have come to love that work.

If this is the case – if there is nothing radically new in what confronts us – then we are not deciding to divest property with the sense of loss that might entail but deciding towards the God we do not yet perceive, have not yet seen or heard but who we believe to be the mystery of all that we are.

By the grace of God, it may perhaps become the case not so much that we ‘have to’ sell all our buildings but that we *want* to, for we long to see a little less darkly through the glass which obscures our vision of God, and of our true selves.

This is the God who shakes yesterday’s foundations – the foundations of good order – by raising from the dead a crucified blasphemer and identifying himself with one who had no place to rest his head except against God’s own heart.

It is the beating of *that* heart which raises the dead. It is the beating of that heart which, Isaiah has seen, causes mountains to shake (64.1-3). And it is the beating of God’s heart which causes also the shaking of the foundations of God’s own church(!). God has done this.

This means that what lies ahead of us at Mark the Evangelist is what was ahead of those who built this place right back at the start: an opportunity to see God tear open the heavens by tearing open us and our history, revealing where God has been among us and assuring us that God will be in our midst in whatever happens next.

It is simply for us, in a spirit of communion with God and with each other, to pray though our working together: come, Lord; excite, open up, tear heaven and earth and piece them together in a new creation, even us.

God can, and wills, to do this. And so we have nothing to fear.
