

Advent 3
13/12/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11

Psalm 126

John 1:6-8, 19-28

No continuing city

In a sentence

The shape our relationship with God takes in our time and place is ever-changing but what does not change is the possibility of that relationship and the steadfast love of God upon which it rests.

Over the last couple of weeks, I have several times to make a connection between the ‘advent’ of God – the approach of God – and what confronts us here at Mark the Evangelist concerning our buildings.

This has not been to put an argument for any particular future, although some preferred futures seem now to be closed to us. The point has been more to clarify the context in which we find ourselves. It is easy to be disoriented by the changes around us, to the extent that we respond to the wrong thing. Whatever our response to these challenges, let us at least be clear about the heart of the matter and respond to it and not to something secondary!

What is before us – to borrow from Isaiah this morning – are ‘the ancient ruins’, the ‘former devastations’ (61.4). Isaiah’s call here is to rebuild, to re-establish – something which his own people *were* able to do for a while, even if it doesn’t appear possible for us.

Israel’s ‘for a while’, however, is important. They finally lost also what had been rebuilt. While language of a future restoration of the city continued, it became a sign for the relationship with God which continued despite the loss of the former glory of Jerusalem and its temple. The city did not last but the prayer did, as those praying and the God to whom they prayed continued in a relationship of mutual address.

Our life with God, then, takes no predetermined or guaranteed shape. Ours is what the Uniting Church’s *Basis of Union* calls the condition of having no ‘continuing city’.

In our psalm today, the poet remembers, ‘When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream’ (Psalm 126). The restoration is celebrated, yet the reason for this remembering is that now the people’s mouths are no longer filled with laughter; rather, they now sow in tears, looking to reap again in joy. ‘Restore us, O Lord,’ is now their prayer.

What is constant throughout the story of God’s people is not where they are or what they are doing but the dynamic of turning away or turning towards God, perhaps even God’s own turning towards and away.

We might want to rage against this – there’s more than a little of that in the Psalms! – but whether we like it or not will not change the reality.

‘Restore us, O Lord,’ is the prayer of the people, of course, when things are not going well.

But 'Restore us, O Lord', should properly also be the prayer of the people when everything seems to be going very well and we are tempted to mistake good luck for divine blessing. The church has had a lot of good luck which, if read as God's blessing, casts our present experience as God's turning away. If that is our situation, there is nothing we can do about but pray with the psalmists, Turn back, O Lord.

But even if God is not the reason we are confronted with these challenges as a congregation – or whatever things face us in our personal lives – to know that we have no continuing city is not to have nowhere to live, it is just to be aware God takes root in a *people* within the sweep of history – not in a location, not in a style of being church, not even in any particular congregation.

The restoration for which the psalmist prays is a restoration to *joy*. Joy is a contentment which springs from the sense that our future is in God, despite what the indicators around us might be.

And if we are confident that our future is in God, then so also is our *present* and every step we must take towards that future.

In our personal and our corporate lives, then – indeed *all* things – let us take upon ourselves Isaiah's garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit, and step with confidence into our promised future with each other, in God.
