

Pentecost 10 C
8/08/2004

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 1:1-2, 11-17

Psalm 85

Hebrew 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

To be a pilgrim:

The Baptism of Elizabeth Megan Vincent

To be a pilgrim. Most of us know that tradition requires all Muslims, once in their life, to make the same pilgrimage as Muhammad did from Mecca to Medina. Less well known in our part of the church is that in the first twelve hundred years of Christian history there were three journeys held sacred by Christians, each of which called for certain sacrifices and offered particular blessings. The first led to the tomb of St Peter in Rome. Those who travelled this way were called wanderers and took the cross as their sign. The second led to the Holy Sepulchre of Christ in Jerusalem. Those who made this journey were called palmists, after the palm branches which people used to greet Jesus on his entry to Jerusalem. The third led to the mortal remains of St James (San Tiago) who was buried in a field in Spain where a shepherd had seen a brilliant star. Known as the star field (Compostela in Spanish) travellers who made this journey were called pilgrims and took the scallop shell as their symbol. Many significant historical figures and millions of pilgrims made the 700 kilometre journey from France to Santiago de Compostela. Forgotten for many centuries, there is now a great revival of interest in such journeys. Old pathways over alien territory are being travelled, not only by the faithful: many are hungry for something the journey seems to promise, though they may not have the words to describe what, in their heart, they seek.

To be a pilgrim. Our first hymn, and the reading from Hebrews each speak of this in different ways. Hebrews recalls how Abraham and Sarah left home to journey towards a surprising new inheritance promised them by God. In both the hymn and the reading the journey is not one of empty wandering. It is a journey based on a promised outcome: life eternal for John Bunyan, the city whose architect and builder is God in Hebrews. In each case the pilgrims moved forwards, drawn by a vision for the future, their own and others. Their journey was - towards God. They had no guarantee of when or where the fulfilment would come but were able to make this journey in hope and trust because what they were seeking was, in some way, already in their hands. In coming to know the promise of God, they had come to know God - and in life there is nothing else worth having.

Hebrews uses Abraham and Sarah to testify to what it looks like when people live by being sure of what you hope for and certain of what cannot be seen. They are a model of vowed intent. It sounds simple, but it led to the complete reshaping of their existence, and it changed our way of thinking about the world. No longer settled comfortably at home doing predictable things, Abraham and Sarah became aliens and pioneers of a new tradition. They were not tourists. Their lives suddenly began to go somewhere - but theirs was no five star journey. They would have needed lots of true valour, that is - courage. It was not something they stirred up in themselves, and it did not mean there would be nothing on the way to tempt or frighten them. Their courage came from knowing their story was linked into a much bigger story that stretched from Creation to

the end of time. It came from knowing that, underlying the normal contours of life, there are realities, not part of our normal view, which have the power to affect the way we look at life and the actions we take.

Pilgrimage is a theme relevant to the celebration of Baptism because by the means of this sacrament does Elizabeth Megan become a pilgrim today, with us and all who have travelled or ever will walk this way. Her pilgrimage begins in an important place: in surroundings where all the signs and symbols point to God whose good pleasure is to give us the very best thing we can ever have - a life of relationship with the divine reality. The context in which we begin is one in which the gift of God's presence and rule over all things is already promised. Our inheritance is laid up, and so we may travel the journey of life through this world, not without trouble, but in the peace of knowing God is for us. It is this which binds us to God, and to one another.

At the Monastery of New Norcia there used to be a cook. Surrounded by all the trappings of monastic life, one day in conversation she said: I'm not religious, I'm an Anglican. She meant she had some beliefs, but she wasn't bound by them. Religion - religio, includes the idea of a bond - a bond that joins us to God and to one another. Baptism joins Elizabeth Megan to God, and to the people of God, and the people of God to her. It makes Baptism all the more powerful sign of God's grace that Elizabeth Megan, as far as we know, is unable to see, or know, or understand what we are talking about here. But it is what we do here that establishes a context of tradition, story, and life - a bond - into which she can grow. Together with David and Desley we promise to help Elizabeth Megan grow into this story, into which she is immersed today, that it may become her guiding vision - something which she comes to live from with ever deepening trust and understanding. We do this, not to make her a citizen of the world, but to make her a citizen of world of the future - as were Sarah and Abraham, and John Bunyan's pilgrim.

And our prayer is that Elizabeth Megan will be moved to make this pilgrimage herself, as an act of her own will and a desire of her own heart. Our hope is that she will come to know the language and symbols of a deeper vocabulary and have her life anchored in the unfailing treasure that is God. Our prayer is that she will be blessed by being found standing amongst those who are indeed seeking God, when God comes to seek us.