

Pentecost 11
15/08/2004

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80
Hebrew 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

Fire on the earth and the Christian Olympiad

On Thursday the “Age” carried a Leunig cartoon showing a runner crossing a desert carrying a flaming Olympic torch. On the horizon fire and thick smoke can be seen. The desert is in Iraq where oil wells burn as the world, thirsty for more fossil fuel, enters ever more deeply into a crisis over supply. Part of Leunig’s meaning is that when the ancient Olympics began a truce was called, allowing those attending to pass in peace through hostile lands aflame with conflict. Leunig’s image of the fire and the race provides a bridge between the gospel and the epistle today. Hebrews speaks of the life of faith as a Christian Olympiad and exhorts us to lay aside every hindrance and run with perseverance the race that is set before us. In this is a link with the ancient practice of athletes carrying objects when they ran the Marathon. In the race of faith Hebrews would have us carry nothing distracting to weigh us down. And in running our race it sees us as surrounded by a great company of witnesses, as if in a stadium. The writer is speaking to a community living in trying times. Tired and disheartened it is beset by the temptation to give up or stray from the goal. The cloud of witnesses are there as those who have kept their eyes on the finishing line and, having completed the race, now wait for others to come through. Their lives stand in the memory of the community to inspire those still running. Even though the pressures they were put under exacted a horrific price the stadium of history is full of people who saw with great clarity that the future belongs to God. The prize is ahead of us and the one who gives it will not let us down.

In Luke Jesus speaks about being under stress as he prepares to pass through his Baptism of fire. He is speaking of his decision to resolutely go to Jerusalem and there endure the cross of suffering. His journey to the cross ignited something that created division between those amongst whom it was kindled. This does not seem like peace, but the Olympic flame is divisive in a similar sense in that, carried and cast in peace, it nevertheless opens a time of decision and judgement for those in the race. Those who do not maintain the discipline and realize the importance of the time will risk losing the prize. Jesus calls his hearers to understand the change his work is bringing about, for it affects the priorities we choose for the way we live. Similarly, Hebrews’ exhortation to tenacity is a call to the community of faith to be vigilant concerning the integrity of their mission.

These are words from a time of crisis that may not seem close to us. How many of us find our attachment to the gospel something which causes us to choose between faith and our families or friends, as we see in Luke? And where are the onslaughts on our faith and practice which demand the athletic discipline and focus of us such as is demonstrated by those named in the great cloud of witnesses? The great Church Historian Jaroslav Pelikan was asked: “What is the greatest crisis facing the Church in America today?” He replied: “Boredom.” Our experience is more likely to be that, surrounded as we are by apathy in matters of faith, or at worst, tedious controversy. But in other parts of the world people do indeed suffer the time of trial from which we pray

to be kept. Two weeks ago the Christian minority in Iraq were subject to a co-ordinated wave of car bombs attacks. As worshippers in Baghdad gathered for Sunday evening prayers over 50 people were injured and 11 were killed. In many countries of the Middle East and the Levant the Christian Church becoming extinct through emigration as people move to escape ostracism, persecution and death.

Hebrews was written to counter the faith fatigue caused by confronting such battles. Our issues are different but we also know faith fatigue, and there are distractions - enemies that rob us of our physical, spiritual and mental energy. It is very easy to lose sight of the main game. The antidote Hebrews offers is threefold: 1. Maintain an appetite for the peace of God. That is train your eye on the future which is in God's hands and keep the openness and balance that reflects the nature of God's justice; 2. Keep focussed on the pursuit of holiness. That is, remember you have been called out and called together by another for a purpose not your own; 3. Be vigilant. Self-consciously remember that you are called to do Christian work.

All three of these apply to the issue raised in Isaiah's the song of the vineyard. The vine and the vineyard are symbols for the people of God, painstakingly created and tended for the purpose of bringing forth good things in the world. The vine stood for life, the wine brought joy and its existence made life worth living. As we see in Isaiah's poem, the vineyard brought forth bad fruit. The people of God allowed themselves to be distracted from their given purpose. In the New Testament the symbol of the vine is transferred to the Messiah, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, the exemplar, of what God seeks. In life he lived to reflect the nature of God's justice and he died trusting the future as being in God's hands. He self-consciously did not allow himself to be distracted from the things God called him to do and to be.

The vineyard is proving to be ever popular in Australia; a good place to visit and enjoy. The graphic on the front of the Order of Service is an image which even has some resonance with our location here in Curzon St. There is a tower, there is a wall and a compound containing a number of things, but all are intended to bring forth life, which is the purpose of this place. As a vineyard for God in this city our purpose is to honour God, and in this be a good place to visit and enjoy. It is in the honouring of God that we maintain our purpose, which is to keep alight the flame of faith that has been kindled amongst us so that the burning desire for God may be kindled in others.

As we approach our 150th anniversary, and begin to contemplate what we have been and where we might aim to go in the future, it is good to remember the image of the vineyard. It was created to be a life-giving place, and our celebrations will fail if in them we do not hear again the call to maintain the integrity of that mission. There are many things we might dream of doing; renovations to plan and implement, projects of outreach and justice to engage in - but none of this makes sense apart from the purpose of our being here which is meant to be Holy - living out the calling that comes to us from another; Catholic - doesn't try to do everything but maintains fullness of scope in its vision; and Apostolic - understands itself as sent forth to do Christian work. In order to do this, we do maintain disciplines, just like an athlete. We are coached by memories of faithfulness, and we are vigilant concerning the purpose of our mission. All of this is the expression of us running the race, the Christian Olympiad, begun at our Baptism and continued in our Christian life. God grant us the wisdom to see these purposes, and the strength to fulfil them.