

Pentecost 12
22/08/2004

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

Six verbs: the prophecy of Jeremiah

This has been a big week for issues related to speaking the truth. Questions remain unanswered over the behaviour of the disgraced Greek athletes. And, as the Tampa sailed into Sydney harbour, the government's dark victory in the children overboard affair came back to haunt it. Our leaders have been educated in a school that trains them never to admit a mistake or wrongdoing. In the face of evidence to the contrary, their commitment to an earlier version of the story evokes the spectre of Goebbels' dictum: if you repeat a lie often enough people come to believe that what you are saying is the truth.

Today is the first of nine Sundays on which we will hear readings from the prophet Jeremiah. His call, powerful and dramatic, is of a type with other biblical prophets. There is a divine encounter, a commission is offered and at first resisted, and there follows a ritual act ordaining the person for the task. Jeremiah felt overwhelmed at his destiny but, as the graphic shows, God put the words in Jeremiah's mouth. He did not elect himself to this role. He was to be the messenger of another. Not from his own insights, his own intelligence, his anger or his pathology did Jeremiah prophecy. His preaching was not the product of his family history or unhappy circumstances of life. God put the words in Jeremiah's mouth; his body was the chosen vehicle through which God's sovereign word would become a living reality in the world. He was the vehicle for a message from one who did not deal in idle talk, but spoke with creative power; the power to make and end, and to give life. This did not mean Jeremiah was like an oracle, possessed by a spirit and no longer in control of his feelings or reactions. He is the most human of the prophets and suffered greatly in his dangerous calling and the theological heritage of his family meant something for his work. But he spoke for another, words that he himself may never have chosen to utter.

There are six verbs at the end of Jeremiah's call, four are negative and two are positive: to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. The message is, there would be an end: no tradition, historical structure, political party or defense mechanism would secure the community against an unthinkable crisis. And there would be a new and inexplicable beginning. These six verbs lead through sorrow and destruction to new life and, not entirely incidentally, point the way to the structure of the whole book. Jeremiah is book of harsh endings and amazing new beginnings.

Jeremiah was from a family who lived according to the Exodus traditions of Israel. However he was called to prophesy in Jerusalem, where court and Temple prevailed and the people were smugly secure in their traditions and institutions. He had to announce the unthinkable: the danger from the north would bring a profound historical crisis out of which, eventually, God would bring utterly inexplicable newness. There would be exile, and eventually there would be restoration. Jeremiah called the people to see that God's word is the word with the power to bring life and freedom,

unencumbered by the inertia of enduring structures, or the powerless despair that visits when hope is gone. On the surface it seems Jeremiah was a prophet of death and destruction, but when he reached the bottom line he spoke for life. This means that God had not given up on the people; it was still possible to imagine a future.

Jeremiah's word was resisted. As we know only too well, it is the way of ruling authorities, and populations, to envision what they want to see, and to continue in what is regarded as the only thinkable way.

In another part of the bible Jesus, on the road to Jerusalem confronted the people with a formula of demolition and restoration such as Jeremiah conveyed. At the cleansing of the Temple in John, Jesus is speaking also of his own body when he says: Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up. (John 2:19) He challenged his audience to contemplate a radical discontinuity of life followed by a powerful and seemingly impossible newness. And his life was one in which, in the face of death-dealing status quo, newness was envisioned and demonstrated.

We see an example of this in the Gospel today. Without even soliciting help a woman, long bound in paralysis, was liberated. This act of restorative justice was grace beyond imagining and yet when it happened the religious authorities objected. For them there could be no deviation from the pattern of life! This is the Sabbath day - we are here to celebrate the holiness of God, not set people free! The exceptions to the Sabbath rule allowed leading a donkey to have a drink, but rebelled at overturning forces which had confined a soul for 18 years!

Hebrew compliments this reading very well. It contrasts two covenants: one, bound by rules and fear; another, characterised by the festal life resulting from knowing that we belong to the immovable, uncreated life of God. All else may topple or be shaken out, but the faithful are caught up in the great company of the saints living in the light and liberation that is God. The rejoicing of the crowd over Jesus' healing in the synagogue is a response that mirrors exactly that. Here is the freedom, the life, the rejoicing, that is rightly the core of life for those who have embraced the creative word of God.

Truthful words; words with creative power - we long for them in the life of church and society. As whistle blowers have spoken we wonder whether their words will have the power to pull down or uproot; to plant seeds that will grow into a new, life-giving regime for us. Or whether what they say will prove no stronger than idle talk. Where are the voices with the creative, prophetic power; the strength to make and end, and to give life? As against the seemingly raw power gifted to Jeremiah, as church we find ourselves in a context in which created things hold power while the signs of the uncreated realm are in decline or totally absent. We live in a time when the church seems to be relentlessly dragged into exile, and we wonder which way to look to find the real power. Albert Schweitzer once said that every action of the Christian should be a prayer for the coming of God's kingdom. These are old words, but they link prayer and action, worship and mission, and they mean that every action of ours should be shaped by the prayer that is open to the sovereignty of God - the unshakeable thing. This is what we must look for, and work for, as we ourselves journey through dark passages and scramble about in the smoke and rubble of history, and as we seek to reach out to those who have suffered in grave and tragic ways. We are not prophets like Jeremiah, but the creative power given him was also gifted to us in Jesus Christ. He is the one in whom we see what the kingdom God has given us looks like. He it is who points us to domain that, in the in the midst of the greatest upheaval, remains unshaken. Our calling is to so live that our deeds will be shaped by God's deeds for us. For it is

this we trust, not our own efforts. Because of this in faith and trust we can say, deeds done for God's sake may yet become signs of life amid the rubble of history. And by God's transformative grace, they may appear perfected on the day when God is all in all.