

Pentecost 18
3/10/2004

Mark the Evangelist

Lamentations 1:1-6
Psalm 137
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

By the rivers of Babylon: on keeping faith in hard times

The Wailing Wall was recently in the news. The camera panned to the site where stands the remains of the second Temple in Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. It had replaced the Temple built by Solomon which was destroyed when the Babylonians overran Jerusalem in the 6th C BC. That some Jewish people are deeply attached to this site was obvious from the news item. The camera focussed on Jewish pilgrims arriving at the wailing wall blindfolded, then overwhelmed at seeing it for the first time.

As we know, the Wailing Wall is a contested site. Nearby stands the Dome of the Rock, which commemorates the spot from which Mohammed ascended to Heaven. A more powerful symbol of the tensions affecting this part of the world there could hardly be. The news item went on to say there have been two occasions recently, when plots to blow up the Dome of the Rock have been foiled. Plans for such a contentious action it is linked to the present level of stress and violence between Israel and Palestine.

In the face of frightening thoughts about the sort of devastation that could erupt in Jerusalem, we hear the words from long ago: How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! It is the language of Lamentations, thought by some to be the work of Jeremiah, which is why it appears in this series of readings.

Lamentations is a book of dirges developed for use in rituals of mourning. In the modern world these are read at the point in the Jewish calendar where the destruction of the Temple is commemorated, and it is likely these are the prayers used when people visit the Wailing Wall. The poetry of Lamentations reflects the agony of the loss of the city and the Temple. The city that was once great among the nations, and heir to the promises of God, is now pictured as a ghost town: bereft of people in the streets and approaches, without majesty or prestige, humiliated by what seems to be the departure of God's power. The people have become servants, subject to their foes, living far from home as exiles among the nations. In our own culture there are places where the language is strong enough to carry the depth of feeling in Lamentations. We can compare these sentiments with the opening of Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice where Antonio says: In sooth, I know not why I am so sad...

Psalm 137 complements this context and the mood of profound sorrow and homesickness of those who endured the days of conquest and the sufferings of captivity. By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. The historian Herodotus described Babylon as a city surrounded by a deep moat and separated in the middle by the river Euphrates. All the streets led to the river where there were little gates to gain access. There were landing places for boats and seats on which to rest, and of course, willow trees. This pleasant environment was nonetheless a place of suffering. In particular the people were tormented by the idea that their circumstances signified rejection by God. In their sorrow they sang the Psalms and longed for restoration. The Babylonians must have caught them doing this and asked for

more, thinking these were folk songs or the like. But these were prayers; songs in praise of God. The indignation at the request and the refusal to play or sing is born of Israel's humiliation, and sense of reverence. Hearts that are in anguish cannot sing praise as entertainment for a heathen audience. To do so would be to betray the homeland and its people and expose them, and God, to the mockery of their enemies. They chose not to give dogs what is holy, because it would have amounted to forgetting God; allowing something other than the praise of God to be their concern.

To our way of thinking concentration on the sentiments of lament is not popular. We are usually more ready to celebrate to positive aspects of faith. But the church is truly blessed to have a communal witness that reaches into the deepest recesses of our humanity. Poetry and verse of such deep feeling and emotion are part of our rich heritage. We find in the bible a communion of witness amongst God's people to the gift of lament; without this witness we would find ourselves lost for words, unable to express the depth of our sorrow, anger, and grief.

The remarkable thing about Lamentations and the Psalm is that, while inspired by the worst possible circumstances, these are still poems and songs directed to God. There is more than grief here; there is a note of fidelity, which has something to do with keeping faith in hard times.

The Biblical faith was enriched by these experiences in Babylon - good things have come from the bad as indeed they may do for us. While the people were dispersed amongst the nations and mourned the loss of home in the deepest sense, their songs were songs to God. The irony of the exile was that to this day many of Abraham's children have continued to choose to live among the nations, so that God's name has been praised the world over, and the nations have, in this way, been enriched. And we should not forget that when Mark the Evangelist and the others went forth to spread the Gospel, the Jewish communities in Diaspora were often their first port of call. When some the people of Israel became detached from Jerusalem, commencing in Babylon, it laid the foundation for the Christian mission several centuries later.

Keeping the Faith in hard times is also a theme in Timothy and Luke. In Timothy the concern is with passing on the faith to the third generation and with rekindling the flame in a preacher who may have been under pressure or in danger of growing cold. The spirit called for is not a spineless, broad speaking about love. It fully realises that the Gospel is a scandal, which runs against the ways of the world and it calls for different priorities which need to be boldly set forth. Our church leaders' response to the Labour package on Education was one point where deeper thought could have been given to what was said. Listening to the news bulletin it seemed it was left to a government shadow minister to remind us that the plan was to provide the most needy with more resources - a priority worthy of the gospel.

Under pressure Timothy calls the church to return to the creed we confess. The apostolic faith, which informs us and forms us, is the divine treasure. In these riches we are called to live. There is here a connection with Luke. The disciples have found the going tough and ask for more faith. Jesus' response sounds like a rebuke, but the form of Greek used can be translated if you have faith (and you do) the size of a mustard seed... There is good news here: even the smallest faith is enough to put them in touch with the power of God! They are not called to acquire another theology degree or amass further resources. They are challenged to rely on what they already have, which is exactly what Paul's exhortation to Timothy is about. Even a little faith is enough. Do not let it grow cold.

The question is, in good times or in bad, where will our focus lie. On the real riches we possess that are not diminished by devastation or loss, or on other things. From Babylon faith still shines from the deep darkness of lament. And as followers of Christ who travel the troubled roads of the world of today, we can learn from their approach to keeping faith in hard times.