

Pentecost 25
21/11/2004

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm: Benedictus
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

Christ the King: the power of life in an unexpected place

Whale Rider is a film based on a Polynesian Creation myth: when all the world was empty and despairing a leader arose who came, riding on a whale. The story is set in a Maori Village that has lost its spirit. Those who remember life as it used to be believe a new leader, yet to be born, will arise and lead them to the prosperity they once knew. When the village leader hears that he is to become grandfather to twins, he feels sure this is the awaited sign. In childbirth the boy twin dies but the girl survives and is given the ancestral name Paikea. But, as a girl, it is assumed she cannot be the leader. At 12 years of age all the boys her age receive instruction, but she is excluded. Paikea finds an uncle, who had failed as a leader, and takes instruction from him. The time of testing comes when all the candidates have to retrieve a whale tooth thrown into the sea. All the young men fail but later Paikea retrieves the whale tooth. Her uncle understands what this means. When a pod of whales beach themselves near the village it is regarded as a very bad sign and an attempt is made to scapegoat Paikea over the disaster but, as the whole community fails in their attempt to turn the whales around, it is she who succeeds, riding the lead whale out to sea, where she nearly drowns. As she lays unconscious in hospital the village leader prays over her, asking for forgiveness, and finally recognises that she is the new chief he has searched for all his life. It was a slow process of recognition. "Prophets are not always what you want or expect": here a young girl gave the community the hope it needed to live again.

One role of the prophet is to offer a new, imaginative perception of reality, which allows us to see our own life and context in the light of God's freedom and will towards justice. The issues of God's freedom and justice are not always expressed in connection with the big issues of life. They can be discerned wherever people try to live together and worry about their future and identity, just as in the Maori village, or in suburban Melbourne during Federal and Council elections.

Jeremiah criticizes the leaders who have ruled in his lifetime and offers a new paradigm. The self-centred use of power, resulting in the scattering of the people in exile, had destroyed their well-being, made a just public life impossible and has caused the nation to fail. The rulers, religious and kingly alike, bore the name righteous, but did not embody its reality. Now a new thing will happen: God will gather the people, restore them to their home, and raise up shepherds who offer them genuine care. This action is God's own intervention and the promise, though ideal will be grounded in the real flesh and blood of history. God acts to restore the people and generate the quality of public life that has been missing in the land. People will be gathered, not scattered. Life will follow death instead of the other way around. Power will be combined with gentle care, manifest in one in whom God will genuinely be at work. This is an entirely unexpected and undeserved offer made in a context of anguish; a time when the knowledge of their failed relationship with God was at a peak.

Images concerned with the exercise of power rightly belong to the feast of Christ the King. There are a number of biblical theologies of power that complement and correct one another but converge on Jesus Christ. The first tradition arising from the Exodus remembers God's liberating acts. The second, centred around David, focuses on God's royal rule. The third, derived from the Wisdom tradition, reflected deeply on the human predicament and the mysterious power of God the Creator, and calls the wise to trust God, not their own wisdom. The fourth, which accentuated the distinction between what is holy and unholy, centred on worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. The fifth, arising from the struggles of the powerless, highlighted God's vindication of the poor. And the sixth, born of confrontation with evil forces and cosmic catastrophes, offers the radical hope of the apocalyptic tradition, which stressed God's renewing judgement. In all of these it is life for us which is God's aim, life that follows the crisis of death that surrounds us.

The prophetic tradition shifted emphasis from the past glory of David's failed kingship to the future action of God to bring about a new and fully just Davidic ruler. What sort of power does God's anointed exercise? The question is all the more important if we see ourselves as living under that power and somehow being stewards of it, aiming to live ethical lives and share in the struggle for justice, peace and the renewal of creation. In the recent elections, here and overseas, the presence of Christian groups, actively campaigning for politicians, and standing for parliament themselves causes us to ask: what sort of power should we be seeking to wield and to what end?

Jeremiah's ideal of shepherding power is of one who gathers and builds community: it is nurturing power. Today this is linked with the inner sanctum of faith, Luke's Passion narrative. The leaders, the soldiers and one of the thieves address Jesus as the favoured one of God: he is mocked because he is supposed to have the power and three times is challenged to save himself. The assumption is that if he had the power he should use it for his own relief and to secure his position and glory exactly as previous shepherds of Israel had done. He does not follow the pattern of past leaders, but he does exercise power. He does save, but not himself. When the second thief asks to be remembered by him this is a deep moment. Here, as if in a flash of insight, we see Jesus' real power: the power to gather to God those who call on him. The power of the forgiveness of sin, and the meaning of salvation is not to be let off from earthly troubles, but to be joined with the one in whom God came amongst us to search us out and lead us to fullness of life.

It is a wise church that develops a mature and healthy attitude to power and its use in the world. In some way, at some time, we are all caught up in the circle of oppression and violence that is our system. And even in relative comfort we know the costly struggle of faith. We also need to see how cynically the system exploits our interests and how soon it changes focus once its own agenda is met. Commentators are saying that we will not hear any more about Gay Marriage or Abortion now that the Elections are won. And let us not forget religious issues aren't restricted to these topics: War, Homelessness and Poverty are also religious issues - as are many others.

In *Whale Rider* it took a long time for the people to recognize the presence of their new leader. For us there is a similar issue because the source of real power is completely different from what we might expect. The leader we long for is already among us but if we work from ordinary stereotypes he appears in a form that makes it hard to recognize. As we celebrate the Reign of Christ, we also have to see that as God's agent, the one who reconciles and makes peace, Jesus takes a completely different path to other leaders we know. If we intend to follow him, if there is any thought that he should be our mentor, or we are stewards of his power, we cannot avoid seeing that his power is

not the same as the military might that has recently rained down on Fallujah. Nor is it the same as the power that wraps itself in explosives to erupt as revenge in a cafe or supermarket. It is the sort of power that does not seek its own gain, but stands with others in their pain and opens to them a new way of life. It is more like the power that leads a man some of us know to go to Baghdad to pray with the people, and offer them succor as the bombs reign down. It is the power to enter into the most vicious expression of earthly power, even into the jaws of death itself, knowing that life follows death, not the other way around. Paradise is God's gift; it is already ours, and we need not live in emptiness, doubt, hatred and fear.