

Year A
16 January 2005

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40 1
Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

The Polished Arrow

He made... me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified". Isa 49:2b-3a.

Near the end of Tolkien's "The Hobbit" the residents of Esgaroth are being threatened by a notorious dragon named SMAUG. For many years Smaug had lived in a cave under a nearby mountain where he kept guard over the accumulated treasure of the surrounding lands. It was alienated treasure. Conquering soldiers had stored it in the cave and later Smaug settled there, making it impossible to retrieve. On the day in question some travellers had tried to raid Smaug's cave. They disturbed the dragon, which emerged from his lair and took revenge by flying over the town, setting fire to it with his flaming breath. The archers of Esgaroth stood together to defend their town, but to no effect. The scales on the dragon were too strong and their arrows broke or bounced off. With each pass Smaug made over the town the supply of arrows diminished and more archers were caught by the flames. Bard, the captain of the archers, who was descended from a long line of warriors, was there, shooting with his long bow. The flames were closing in on him as he put his hand to his quiver to find that he had only one arrow left. Suddenly a bird settled on his shoulder and, to his amazement, it spoke to him.

"Wait, wait!" said the bird. "The moon is rising... as the dragon flies over you, look for the hollow of the left breast!"

The moon began to rise. The dragon was circling back, flying low. Bard drew the string of his long bow to his ear. The dragon swooped once more, lower than ever, and, as he turned and dived, the bowman could see the place the bird had told him about. As he fired the last arrow he said:

Arrow...Black Arrow! I have always saved you to the last. You have never failed me and always I have recovered you. I have had you from my father, and he from of old... Go now, and speed well. (The Hobbit p 236)

The great bow twanged and the black arrow sped straight to the spot. So sharp was it, and so fierce its flight, that in it went, feather and all. With a deafening shriek the dragon fell, crashing to the ground. A generation of terror was ended.

Isaiah speaks of a polished arrow, and of a mouth as sharp as a sword, in connection with the Servant of the Lord. The prophet spoke at a time when there existed a deep alienation between God and the people. As captives in Babylonian they were far from all they treasured: home, Temple, lands, flocks and vines. They were depressed, and their life was cut off. What future did they have? All their years of toil, what did it amount to? The prophet spoke of restoration. The people were to regain their freedom and stand as a light to the nations, a sign of God's wish to redeem all people. The prophet affirms that from the beginning Israel was called to be the servant of God and

now would be endowed with powers of the word that would cut deeply and range widely to bring glory, not to themselves, but to God. Israel was to be God's polished arrow, hidden for a time, and now revealed for a purpose.

John the Baptist points to Jesus and says, here is the Lamb of God... There are rich and complex associations with this image - the Passover Lamb of the Exodus, the Lamb of sacrifice that filled the place meant for Isaac, the Paschal Lamb of the Christian era. The world lamb is used twice in this passage. In between the first and the second usage John testified that he saw the Spirit - the Bird of Heaven - rest on Jesus, and knew that the One who had called him to preach had made it clear that Jesus was the polished arrow, the one prepared for a special time and mission.

John says of Jesus he takes away the sin of the world ... Here is the one whose power came from the source of all things and is strong enough to breach the chink in evil's armour. There is a link here between the forgiveness of sins and Baptism, a metaphor for Jesus' total entering into life with us even to the point of penetrating death. By this means God's servant goes to the foundation of our existence and puts it right restoring a relationship to us that had become damaged and lost. The agent of this accomplishment is not a weapon of offence, but it speeds to the mark with precision like a polished arrow. It is divine, suffering love, fully present and expressed in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the one in whom God gives us what God wants us to have. Love that is strong enough to suffer with us and show us there is a power greater than death. Love that ranges widely to show us that above and beyond all our faults we are cared for in a way almost too deep to understand.

On the day the nation has set aside to remember those lost as a result of the Tsunami, this is the message our readings bring to us. On this day it might have seemed more appropriate if words such as those from Psalm 46 had been our theme:

God is our refuge and strength,
a helper close at hand, in time of distress,
so we shall not fear though the earth should rock,
though the mountains fall into the depths of the sea;
even though its waters rage and foam,
even though the mountains be shaken by its waves.

But while our readings do not argue about the created order, or speculate how natural disasters fall within the sovereignty of God, they tell us how John uncovered the one in whom God gave us what we need to know.

The second time John exclaimed: Look, there is the Lamb of God! there follows a series of actions that involve the calling of the first disciples. They see, follow, and receive the gift of a new identity. Our calling is the same as the first disciples: in the light of this revelation, the task is to follow this one as teacher and join him in the work of being Servant of God.

At the end of the battle of Esgaroth the people didn't yet realise what had happened. When John pointed to the Lamb of God, the people had yet to learn the meaning of his preaching. It may be that way for us too. We may not yet fully realise what God has done. We may be more conscious that for us there are still dragons that need slaying. Dragons exist wherever the powers of death have full play, where people are enslaved or depressed, and the world is robbed of good things. What we do know is there are

times and places where a word from the Bird of Heaven is still needed. And there is a role for a servant people with sharp, bright, penetrating insights, to help remove threats to hope and life. Wherever people do not know God; wherever they are denied their full dignity; wherever peace is destroyed; wherever there is needless suffering, or unmerciful exploitation - in these and many other places the dragons are still in control, and wealth that is for all to share lies out of reach.

We may not be a Bard, a warrior from a long tradition, or a prophet, but we are God's people, who have heard God's NO to death and God's YES to life, for us, and all the world. With this gift we have all we need begin to defeat our own dark forces, and to lend our energy to help defeat death's threat to others in the world.