

Pentecost 18
25/9/2005

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 17:1 - 17
Psalm 78
Phil 2:1 - 13
Matthew 21:23 - 32

The prostitutes and tax collectors go in ahead of you

Mary of Magdala is a significant figure in Scripture and tradition. It was she who saw the Lord on Easter morning, having first mistaken him for the gardener. The Gospels know her as a follower of Jesus, out of whom he had cast seven devils. The seven devils implies lust as being one of her sins and from this it is concluded that she was a prostitute. She stands first amongst the many such women, and other bad characters, who responded to the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus.

During the Middle Ages Mary Magdalene's story was elaborated in a way that is loosely connected with the Gospel. Her parents were called Cyrus and Eucharion, rich and noble people who lived in the castle of Magdala. Mary, the youngest of three children, was betrothed to St John the Evangelist and it was in their honour the wedding feast of Cana was arranged. On that occasion John left his bride to follow Jesus. Mary, beside herself with resentment, fled to Jerusalem, where, unmindful of her birth, forgetful of the law of God, she became a prostitute. Her house became a temple of demons, for seven devils entered her and plagued her continually with desires. After some time Jesus cast out the seven devils and when he visited Martha and Lazarus for supper, Martha persuaded her erring sister to be present. She came, and with bare head and bare feet anointed Jesus with the precious ointment she had previously bought for use in her profession. All the things she had done before in the service of the flesh, she now in sorrow turned to the service of the Lord.

Such stories have been immensely popular in the church, and have given rise to feast days and liturgical traditions. Although we would regard these stories as somewhat fictional, they are part of a long tradition of Christian hagiography. Stories of extreme sin followed by extreme repentance and extreme love. They show people, full of faults, in the process of redemption. The events recounted always relate to Christ the redeemer and often involve the help of another person who represents the companionship of the church. These stories are told so that the moment of grace in these lives might touch others, bringing about repentance, or encouraging them in their faith.

The church has venerated prostitutes, not because of the sexual sins, but because the about face revealed in their lives showed that people are capable of turning from the utmost extreme to embrace Christ in obedience. Such repentance showed no one need be regarded as God forsaken. This brought hope of salvation to all, no matter how disintegrated their lives, or how alienated from God they had become.

There is a symbolic connection between the prostitutes of the Gospels and the Biblical theme of Israel who, though loved by God played the harlot and dabbled in the false hopes and satisfactions to be found amongst the gods of the nations. A hint of how hard it is to maintain a singular disposition towards God is seen in the reading from Exodus where the people complained of thirst, and speculated whether or not God was with them. Sin and life are inextricably bound up together. When Moses drew water from the

rock, grace and nature combined to bring relief to the people. Once again they lived, refreshed by their obedience to the word of the Lord. But the names Massah and Meribah, which mean, “test” and “quarrel” immortalize their doubt and disbelief on the journey, rather than their trust in God’s goodness.

The readiness of the early church to embrace the repentance of prostitutes and other bad characters is foreshadowed in the Gospel for today, where and they are compared with the religious leaders. In context of controversial behaviour such as cleansing the temple, Jesus is challenged. The religious leaders regard him as a nuisance who had no authority to act as he did. His reply to them was very artful. He answered with a question, which required that they, as people who have studied theology, should be able to recognize God at work, especially as presented to them in John the Baptist. But the leaders did not respond to John as if he were from God, and they were not moved by seeing broken people come to wholeness and reconciliation. The leaders’ decision regarding John equates with their decision regarding Jesus and his mission. Their rejection of him means others will enter the kingdom ahead of them.

The follow up parable about the Yes and No Brothers falls as a judgment on the leaders. They are the ones who said YES, but did not follow through with action. They went through the motions of being God-directed, but did not put their lives on the line. They could not give up what they were really interested in – the thing for which they lusted. Compared to them the God forsaken were able to embrace the moment of grace made present in John’s preaching. Here we see that righteousness is not the same as excellence in religion. Righteousness does not involve being the best qualified or knowing all the facts and theories. The two styles of life, represented by the Yes and No Brothers, reveal that righteousness refers to having the humility to embrace the gift of grace. The only NO that is significant is the refusal to make a new start after having been proven wrong. What this means is that people who are in the process of redemption are not without silliness or errors or faults. They are still capable of transformation, if they are willing.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians we have a classic piece of exhortation which uses possibly the oldest-ever Christian hymn in support of the argument. Paul shows us that in the humiliation and exaltation of Christ, nature and grace combine to reveal the place where we can find the way to life. Paul exhorts his readers to focus on Christ, to take up a disposition that is based on his pattern of self-renunciation. This is a disposition in which there is no attempt at self-justification. To express this in terms of the parable we could say Jesus’ NO to self assertion involved a YES to God that endured to the end. And it is to such a YES, and perseverance in such openness, that we are called, even though we may stumble and fall.

The humiliation of Christ meant he entered into the point of our deepest disintegration, the place of our utmost God forsakenness. The readiness of the prostitutes and tax collectors to receive grace in Christ was a sign that his humiliation touched the place of deep disintegration in which they found themselves. A place where they knew despair of the soul, the risk of refusing life, and the error of calling death life. As against the proud religious leaders, the bad characters stand as a sign that even the blinding, death dealing habits of lust, whatever form they take, can be broken, setting a person free for love and life. The final image of a prostitute is not of an agonised weeping penitent, but of one who has entered into the reality of love for God, and has become part of God’s gift of new creation. The prostitute is a sign of how far God’s grace reaches. Often mentioned in the Gospel, they remind us that the only thing that excludes anyone from

the love of God is not lust, or failure. But a proud attitude that denies the possibility of forgiveness.