

Pentecost 18
30/09/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 32:1 – 3a, 6 - 15

Psalm 91

Hebrews 1 Timothy 6:6 - 19

Luke 16:19 – 31

A deed in a jar: voting for the promised future

Coming as they do from the period prior to the Babylonian exile, the series of readings from Jeremiah have inevitably conveyed strong prophecies of doom. It is helpful to remember that, from his call Jeremiah knew that God was at work in disaster **and** redemption. Today we have reached the border between the two. Jerusalem is under siege for the second time and the prophet is in gaol because his own king, who by now knew Jeremiah's melancholy message by heart, had put him there. The prospects are very glum, but in the final verse, a glimmer of hope appears: "*houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in the land.*" (v.15)

The glimmer of hope relates directly to Jeremiah's call to purchase a field from his cousin Hanamel who lived in the city of Anathoth. It is slightly crazy, and yet is remarkably profound. The biblical laws of redemption provided for property to be kept in the family and Hanamel, who was probably about to try and flee town, made Jeremiah an offer. From Jeremiah's side this was surely a dud deal. And yet as we heard, he meticulously and publicly went through with the land sale. It was a prophetic sign of profound theological significance. It represented a vote for the promised future. It linked faith and public life by proclaiming to all present that **there would be life after Babylon**. The invasion and the siege would bring the economy to a halt, but a time would come when the land would be born again, not by virtue of new economic policies, but by the will and promise of God. Jeremiah paid good money for something apparently worthless. But his investment was based on hope, born of his faith in God.

The reason for the elaborate, public signing and witnessing of the deed is that it was a demonstration to all in the besieged palace that beyond the coming disruption, God's mercy and compassion would prevail for the land and its people. In this way Jeremiah proclaimed what it meant to live according to the promises of God, and trust in a future that could hardly be imagined.

Jeremiah placed the deed in a jar for safekeeping and his secretary Baruch wrote down the story. Although the deed and the jar may long be lost, or awaiting discovery like the Dead Sea Scrolls, the intent of its message has been kept for us in the text we heard today, and we are able to draw meaning and hope from Jeremiah's act of faith.

It is no accident that Jeremiah's challenge leads us to see that to live in hope means being willing to seize the promise of life when, to us, no life seems possible. This is a theme common to the Bible, which testifies to the ways of the living God. But let us see clearly that to live in hope means to cast a vote for the future by doing something

concrete now. What we do now reveals what we think the future of God will be like.

There is a way in which this point can be connected with the story of the rich man and Lazarus. This is a story about how the refusal of charity in the present is a violation of the Law of Moses and therefore is of eternal significance. The rich man's prosperity would have been understood as a blessing of God, but he refused to share what had been given to him and brought no hope or comfort to Lazarus who lived in dire circumstances. Jesus aimed this parable at the Pharisees, who had come to love money. As Timothy says, it is the love of money that leads people away from faith. The question is, what is it that truly captures the focus of our love, and how is that expressed? And what would the equivalent of a deed in a jar look like in our time?

There are two levels to consider: the level of our life and faith as church, and the level of our participation in the community. It is useful to ask what concrete actions we can take to leave a deed in a jar for the future; to preserve the central things of the faith for those who may come along and wish to engage in it, long after we are gone. As a congregation how can we think about this in terms of who we are, where we are, and the resources we have to bring to bear for being the church in the long-term future? Dare we imagine a future in which people will show a lively interest in the church? Can we, as did Jeremiah, plan for a future on the basis of hope in God, rather than caving in to surrounding trends?

We know our context is difficult. The doomsday soothsayers are all about, revealing the statistical decline of the church, and sometimes it seems as though as church, we are being threatened with extinction within our own culture. And now we see an aggressive atheist trend, which is ignorant of the real issues of faith. In a recent article in the Guardian Weekly Tristram Hunt wrote: *When it comes to doctrine, faith or ritual our great atheist warmongers are all at sea... "Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the Book of British Birds, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology."* Christopher Hitchens' work (*God is not Great*) is pervaded by the idea that religion poisons everything. On this basis he tries to undo any sense of the religious convictions of heroes of the European Enlightenment such as Isaac Newton and Joseph Priestly. And when he turns to history he is unable to countenance the idea that faith can inform radical politics. So Dr Martin Luther King was "*no real Christian*", but a "*profound humanist*". Such an approach is intellectually irresponsible; it "*infantilises public debate and closes down political choices.*" (*Guardian Weekly* 21 Sept, p. 22)

As church we know the promises of God empowered visionaries, and made it possible to work for radical proposals that brought renewal for the church and sought a fair deal for the disadvantaged in the world. In the light of what we know about God, it matters that we keep our focus on faith and that the guiding paradigm for social life is not one of privileging the fortunate, but one that seeks to address the needs and wellbeing of the whole community. This means we may have some distance to go in challenging the idolatry of the free market and the belief in the trickle down effect. There are alternatives. Let us be bold in seeking them out.

As we approach another election we may find it useful to consider what a deed in the jar would look like in connection with the policies of our own and other governments

in the world. A deed in the jar as a vote for the future must surely have something to do with choosing to contradict a world obsessed with wealth, weapons and border control. A deed in the jar that votes for the long term future is concerned with investing in different methods of resolving conflict, based on knowing that God has chosen all people in Christ, and to hurt others is to hurt God. A deed in a jar for this time might be concerned with policies and practices that emphasize the inter-relatedness of humankind rather than the demonizing of those who are different. A deed in the jar will certainly entail taking serious steps to address all aspects of Climate Change and the related question of energy use in the world. And who can doubt that if Australia expended the same amount of money and effort on fostering relationships in the world as it is prepared to spend on weapons, this would be making a positive vote for the future.

Both in our life as a congregation and as citizens of planet earth, may we live from the deeper centre that is given to us by the living God, who gave Jeremiah a vision of life beyond disaster, and raised Jesus Christ from the destruction of death to show us that the power of self-giving love is the power to make all things new.