

Pentecost 10
20/07/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 28:10 – 19a

Psalm 139:1 – 12, 24 - 24

Romans 8:12 - 25

Matthew 13:24 – 30, 36 - 43

God is our homeland

The parable of the weeds sown amongst the good seed is about the presence of the Kingdom in the world. It is often applied to the conflict or shortfall between the ideal and reality in personal life, and the challenge of living with others: in families, in religious communities, and in congregations. The good seed stands for our hopes for the life that should be: the best intentions, carefully sown in groups, and in individual lives. And the weeds stand for the introduction of another species, which spoils the perfect outcome and creates a short fall, or even the death of good intentions for life. Most of us have spent long years in congregations and community groups. Who has not occasionally wanted to pull up a weed: to remove the negative influences that choke the healthy plants, and prevent the perfect crop coming to fruition? But Jesus says digging out the weeds does two things. It disrupts and damages the good crop. And it displaces the judgment of God, who in contrast allows the good and the bad to grow together and sorts them out at harvest time.

But community life is pretty tough if things get left like that. Life together is not meant to be a free for all. In the wider context of his work Matthew shows he believes in community discipline, and suggests processes for dealing with conflict and disagreement. There are ways in which protective measures must be applied for the sake of the faith and the life of the community. But the exercise of discipline involves remembering what we are responsible for, and what must be left to God. And it involves always being mindful of the effect weeding has on others.

The story of Jacob is a case study in the remarkable way God works with the good and the bad. What is so remarkable is Jacob is a really bad plant, thriving in Abraham and Sarah's family of promise. Yet God reached out to him, much as the father does in the parable of the Prodigal Son. God did this, not for any reason we can find in Jacob's performance, but for God's sake. And because of this we come to see some deep things about God, and God's ways with us. As the Psalm says God is inescapable, and knows us as we really are. And God chooses to be present with us, in the most unexpected circumstances, for the sake of what God has promised. This is who God is, and what God does for us.

Who was Jacob to whom God was inescapably present in this way? He was the second of twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah. He was a deceiver, a trickster who stole the birthright and blessing that rightly belonged to his older brother Esau. The dream in today's reading occurred when Jacob was fleeing from the tensions and relational conflict in his family, and was on a journey to seek a wife.

Jacob had not left home in search of a religious experience. But here, beyond his

home ground this fugitive, alone and in the full vulnerability of sleep, had a dream through which he received a word of promise from God that changed his life. He was not in control of his destiny and he was not in control of this experience. The encounter is entirely at the behest of God, and from that time the place where it happened was known as Beth-el: house of God.

The wonder and mystery of this experience is that it was God who was present. Not an angel, or someone who looked like God, or an experience that seemed like God. But God! Without being asked, the God of heaven and earth chose to join himself to this trickster in a far off place, in a dream. By any standard this is an inexplicable experience: a cause for awe and wonder, fear and trembling. In contemporary terms we might as well be reading a memoir about Tony Mokbel's religious experience on a Greek Island, so unlikely does it seem!

Outside of Jungian or Freudian psychology we no longer take much notice of dreams, but to our forbears in the faith they were a medium for revelation. The waking world of Jacob's life was dominated by loneliness, fear and terror. But the dream is not about that. Nor is it some sad memory from the past. In word and image it offers a new possibility of life. The ladder tells of traffic between heaven and earth. Heaven is not the remote home of indifferent gods who care nothing for humanity. The message the image brings is, the world has not been left to its own devices. The God of Israel is a God who changes places. The people of earth can count on the goodness of God, who steadfastly stands by the promises God has made.

Jacob was capable of hearing this news when he was totally vulnerable. At the time when he was utterly helpless, the vision of a new future entered his life. He assumed he traveled alone, that life was under his control, that divine reality, if there was such a thing, counted for nothing. And then God of the forebears was present to him and said three things.

1. I am with you. The image of the ladder conveys the central thrust of biblical faith: heaven has come to earth, God has changed places for us. The image and accompanying word refutes all despairing judgments about human life. God is with us. And God commits to the empty handed fugitive. The promise "I am with you" is reissued to Jeremiah (Jer 1:19) and to the people called Israel in the desperate straits of exile (43:1 -2). The name given to Jesus of Nazareth: Emmanuel – "God is with us" is embodied as Jesus commits to tax collectors, prostitutes and the thief on the cross. And at the end of Matthew's Gospel Jesus promises "to be with us always to the end of time".

The second is about action. 2. I will keep you. This is an image of protection, of shepherding. To keep is an image redolent in the Psalms and in benedictions: "the Lord bless you and keep you". "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth..." The keeper of Israel does not come to destroy. Instead the keeper of Israel knows us intimately, enters fully into our life and death, and from the cross guarantees the lives of those who are exposed, defenseless, and undeserving.

The third promise is: 3. You will come home. What a theme this is! It touches all who have been displaced, all who long for home. And it touches something else: it touches all who long for God. For our true homeland is not a piece of ground near the

Mediterranean Sea, a source of nationalist hopes. Our true homeland is God. In this knowledge Jacob journeyed on. As a result of God's presence and his vulnerability, he was able to accept the sovereignty of God: the Kingdom was at hand for him and he was willing to turn and believe. He raised a marker to the presence of God, but he did not make this the only place where God can be found. Instead this marker signifies a broadened and more intimate understanding of God's presence. There was no need to stay at Beth-el as though it were the only sacred space. Jacob traveled on in the new relationship that had been declared to him: his true homeland. This is the citizenship in which he lived. Although he did not return home for many years, he lived in fellowship with God in the assurance of a hope not seen: a promise yet to be realized.

Jacob was on a journey. We have been bombarded by images of Pilgrims lately. St Augustine said: "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." He took the basic human restlessness and turned it towards God. But the good news declared by the Jacob story is that God is restless for us. Any rest that came to Jacob was a result, not of his search for God, but of God's search for him with all his faults. This is the God who knows us, and has embraced us in all our pain and folly. This is the God who has come out to meet us, when we least expected it, to bring us home to life.