

Pentecost 18
21/9/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 16:2-15

Bread from Heaven

Psalms 105:1-6.37-45

God's Faithfulness to Israel

Phil. 1:21-30

Paul's Present Circumstances

Matthew 20:1-16

The Labourers in the Vineyard

Sermon by Elizabeth Brown

In the name of our Holy God: Father, Son, Spirit.

As one Jewish writer has said: More than any other part of the Bible, the psalms touch the reality of our day-to-day existence and have the power to enrich the spiritual quality of our lives. They can be woven into the tapestry of every moment, and give perspective and meaning to every experience. They help us get in touch with ourselves, our emotional reactions to the events of our lives, and our needs. They aid us in finding solace, strength, and hope. They assist us at every moment as we reach out to God, the eternal Thou and Answerer of our needs.

In today's Psalm, 105, there is rejoicing, remembering of their long, continuing Exodus and praise for the God who accompanied them. The Psalms are the prayers of the faithful and this Psalm was penned by an unknown author about the time of the return from exile in Babylon.

REMEMBER, GIVE THANKS, PRAISE the Lord.

This ancient praise tells of ancient deeds; but the Do-er is just as real and active today. He is the Lord of history, past and present and full of mystery. He is not only the Lord of exodus, of deliverance; but also, as Brueggemann writes, the Lord who hears and experiences the hurt suffered by his people, and walks with them in their consequent grief!! He was with them, as indeed he is with us, in all his unattainable transcendence!! Herein lies mystery!

The Psalm's opening verses are a wonderful paean of praise, remembering and thanksgiving. Remember the wonderful things God has done, remember his miracles, his defeat of our enemies; remember whose we are and that this God is the God of our ancestors - the God of Abraham, who obediently and faithfully set out 'to travel beyond all known horizons in search of a promise', the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. This is the God, who not only delivered us; but suffered and grieved with us as we journeyed towards the Promised Land. The Psalm proclaims: 'Remember we are God's chosen ones!!' And so are we! Our Jewish friends still remember this each week at their Friday evening meal as we do each time we celebrate the Eucharist.

The intervening verses of this Psalm detail God's faithfulness as a covenant keeper throughout the Israelites' wanderings, their life and later enslavement in Egypt.

Today's concluding verses continue this history and relate how their God, who could not be named, heard their pleas and nurtured them with meat, with manna, the bread of heaven and streams of living water. How these words continue to resonate with us in this twenty-first century! The Psalmist remembers and rejoices at the fulfillment of the divine promise made to Abraham, so that God's people 'might obey his rules and follow his laws.' What is the relevance of all this for us today?

In the Hebrew scriptures God cannot be named: I-am-who-I-am. Yet, in the fullness of time, this unnamable God became known through the gift of his Son - still God but also human. As John's Gospel recounts so beautifully: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us...'. And God revealed himself to his people. This divine, but human Jesus, Son of God, born of woman - this Middle-Eastern Jew, who enjoyed the company and hospitality of his friends; but who also experienced hunger and thirst, and in the garden even despair! His feet were covered with dust as he walked the dusty roads; in a crowd he would be indistinguishable until one made eye contact and felt totally known and accepted. Then one knew, as Peter knew and as the woman who touched the edge of his robe knew, that this male was more than human.

In a short, but incredibly active ministry of teaching, preaching and healing Jesus showed his disciples the Kingdom of Heaven - the meaning of grace, love, forgiveness and acceptance - a new remembering as a prelude to a new way of life.

Here is both history and mystery, which some believe are incompatible; but is it so? History has it that we all were born on a specific date; but isn't birth accompanied by mystery? Another historical fact is that we are all worshipping here today; but isn't there also mystery here? What promptings of the Spirit led us to this place to worship today? Here, God graces us through the liturgy, the passing of His peace, the sharing of bread and wine. Like the manna in the desert, divine grace cannot be frozen or stored up for a needy day. We need to be continually open to its nurturing and continually reminded whose we are.

Whose are we?? No less than the Israelites, we are God's people - intimately known, dwelt within by God's Holy Spirit and assured of salvation through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. What does this mean? It means, among other things, that we are to be concerned for our fellow human beings, to acknowledge their needs with compassion, and to CHALLENGE AND COMPLAIN about the multitudinous acts of non-love that corrupt our lives and our world. Let us ever keep remembering whose we are. As with the Israelites, we often find it hard not to grumble about minor daily frustrations and equally hard to give thanks for all the blessings we receive. We do this in our own individual ways and must permit others to do likewise. In the Chapel at many hospitals is a book in which people may write their own prayers. They are inspiring full of hope and thanks and usually God is addressed as God; but one day a prayer of thanks was addressed to 'Dear Big-Fella up there...' and I could almost feel God smiling.

In everyday life, the present is paramount - we forget whose we are, become deaf to the promptings of the Spirit, which urge us to positively complain about injustice and the

lack of love in our world today. Personal and public resolution is usually long term and requires patience; but some times a minimal complaint can result in immediate action - many years ago we were entertaining friends with young children - I asked one little girl if she would like another piece of sponge and she replied: Yes, thank you, my first piece wasn't very big!! That complaint was immediately met! At a more serious level, the State Government has, this past week, heard the complaints of its people and reversed its decision to cut out daily concession travel tickets.

Today's Psalm ignores all the grumblings recorded in the Exodus reading and concentrates on God's grace. It emphasizes that then, as now, finding the ability to passionately cry out against unfairness is the first step towards liberation. It overcomes the silence of oppression. Today this is part of our exodus and we must not become silent. Challenges to injustice are legitimate complaints. They may or may not be aggressive, but must be persistently relentless - never letting go as our Lord has shown us. Always remembering WHOSE we are.

So we remember, we give thanks and praise and move on!!! Just as God moved on - from I-am-who-I-am to the Son who called the Father 'Abba', who revealed to us in human flesh the nature of his 'Abba'! So, in our public and personal lives we must move on. Remembrance must not become an encumbrance. This applies especially to us as a congregation as we move from this beloved sacred space to the new - and new and different it will be. But the remembering we carry with us will strengthen us for growth and development beyond our imagination.

There's no standing still! The new sacred space will become part of our remembering. And because of whose we are, our remembering is not stagnant but enlivened by grace, leading to greater understanding and less concern with who we are!

God in his love graced us with the life, death and resurrection of his beloved Son, and gifted us with the Spirit. As with his people of old, he accompanies us on our exodus, intimately sharing our hurt, our grief, our joy. This is divine mystery; but faith enlightens the darkness.

For as Peter wrote: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood,...God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light...' (1Peter 2:9-10).

God is to be ever trusted and our life can ever be renewed. May we continue to worship our living Triune God in spirit and in truth.