

Epiphany 4
31/1/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

Prophets without honour

The idea that prophets are not usually welcome in their own country is not strange to us. For generations Australians endured the cultural cringe, which meant anyone with artistic, academic or scientific talent had to gain recognition overseas before they were accepted here. The ability to make an important, positive contribution doesn't guarantee acceptance at home, even though elsewhere the contributor may be held in high esteem. The dramatic fall in Barack Obama's popularity in the USA is under the spotlight at present, evoking the fear that he will give up the risk of working to achieve important reforms, or worse, his opponents will treat him as they have treated great figures before him, who strove to implement a prophetic vision for change.

The bible is familiar with such rejection. St John wrote: *he came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. [Jn1:]* And St Matthew said: *and one's foes will be members of one's own household. [Mt10:36]* Luke's version is Jesus' dramatic reception in his hometown of Nazareth. This incident is framed one side by his temptation in the wilderness and on the other by him casting out an unclean spirit. The Temptation is a story about the struggle between two sovereignties: God and the powers of evil. The devil's power is like a shadow of God's power and, while it is in fact counterfeit, it offers seductions for a person with messianic ambitions. In the desert Jesus has to choose whom he will serve, and defeats the devil quoting scripture, which represents the power of the word of God. Jesus emerges from the desert as one who lives in the power of the word of God who called him. He is a true minister of the God's sovereignty, and in God's name casts out the dark powers.

When Jesus arrived in Nazareth he was living and teaching in the power that gave him victory in his desert encounter. Everyone was amazed and spoke well of him – at first. The mood shifted once he suggested that in his ministry among them the words and works of God were being fulfilled and that he himself was the living sign of the year of God's favour towards them. *But this is Joseph's son!* They said. The one to come could not possibly be a mere local. The members of his own synagogue were unwilling to believe they could receive God's grace from his hands.

If you are a certain sort of Calvinist, this is very understandable because such people adopt an unbounded view of human depravity which is seen as universal and overwhelming. For them the "No" of God overwhelms God's "Yes". Nevertheless, we have to see the most shocking thing, that those who knew Jesus saw his light as darkness. They did not welcome his gifts to them as born of God's grace towards us. They took offence at him and were moved to violence, which further down the track was allowed to have full sway. They crucified grace and left it to die. The solemn thing about this reading is it exposes the human capacity to resist God to that extent. But this is not the end of the story.

Even in Jesus' defence we find grounds for hope. Luke suggests one grievance against him was that he had already been over the border to Capernaum. He reminded them of two occasions in their own history when God had worked miracles of grace amongst those who were outside the fold. They were resisting the grace amongst them and were made all the more hostile when they heard what they already should have known: they had no control over grace: God is free to choose where divine blessing is offered in the world.

This is a core incident in Luke's gospel, and it prefigures what happens throughout Jesus' ministry and when he goes up to Jerusalem. There, the people succeed in laying hands on him but the resurrection showed that the power of God was indeed at work in him, and continued to seek them out in their blackness and loss. From that time the Good News started to travel to foreign parts, and the Gentiles began to receive the salvation of God.

Prophets without honour: It is a feature of our time that in countries where Christianity has traditionally been strong - Britain, Europe, America and Australia it is now in decline. At the same time adherence to other faiths is growing in these countries, while a new Christendom is emerging in "the South", Africa, Asia, and South America. It is as though the Christian message has become worn out in western culture and hearts are no longer receptive to its message.

Lesslie Newbiggin is a name well known to us. A British Presbyterian who spent several decades as a missionary in India he returned to England in 1979 and, in his retirement years, took a parish in Birmingham. Known as Mary Hill, its nickname was "Merry Hell" because it was a challenging, urban, secular suburb filled with the multi-racial population that has become modern Britain. Newbiggin, the experienced missionary with decades of preaching the word of God behind him said:

"It is much harder than anything I met in India. There is a cold contempt for the Gospel, which is harder to face than opposition. As I visit the Asian homes in the district, most of them Sikhs or Hindus, I find a welcome that is often denied on the doorsteps of the natives. I have been forced to recognise that the most difficult missionary frontier in the contemporary world is the one of which the Churches have, on the whole, been so little conscious, the frontier that divides the world of biblical faith from the world whose values are ceaselessly fed into every home on the television screen. Like others I had been accustomed, especially in the 1960s, to speak of England as secular society. I have now come to realise that I was the easy victim of an illusion from which my reading of the Gospels should have saved me. No room remains empty for long. If God is driven out, the gods come trooping in. England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church. (*Unfinished Agenda*, p.249)

The irony of life in Australia is that while God is back on the agenda in a number of ways and politicians, for example, are far more open than they used to be over matters of faith, the reaction to Tony Abbot's latest outburst has shown there is still deep resistance to some forms of Christianity here. The Church in Australia is a prophet without honour in its own country. As those who seek to live lives inspired by the Gospel, there is a tough task before us of learning how to have a genuine missionary encounter with the culture in which we are placed. Although the people in the Synagogue at Nazareth refused it, Jesus' preaching was a sign of the presence of God's grace. Their refusal did not stop grace, and soon others knew the blessing of its refreshment. Martin Luther said the grace of God was like a shower of rain that fell, and then passed on to another place. Desert dwelling Aboriginal people understood how vital showers of rain were to their struggle for survival in a harsh environment. They knew how to read the signs and would place themselves where rain would fall in order to gain the benefits. Being able to go on in life was possible in so far as they respected what they needed to live, and planned to be where they could receive it. Any missionary encounter we embark upon will involve understanding our context in depth. But it will be empty and powerless, unless we are as willing to recognize what gives life to our faith, and remain open to receive what to others, and at times even to us, may seem an unpalatable gift. Lord, we believe, help our unbelief!
