

Pentecost 20
10/10/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 29:1, 4 – 7
Psalms 66:1 – 12
Lamentations 3:19-26
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

Peace the gift, Peace the task

A Jewish Rabbi and a Christian Pastor who worked in the same town had coffee together. The rabbi remarked: "It's tough to be a Jew here. We are forever telling our kids: "that's fine for everyone else but it's not fine for you... you are Jew. You have a different story. A different set of values." The Pastor turned to him and said: "You are not going to believe this, but members of an adult education class at our church made a similar statement just the other day: "that behaviour is not fine for you, you have a different story, a different set of values: you are Christian." [*Hauerwas and Willimon p 18*] There were times when the church sat very comfortably in our society and unquestioningly gave its blessing to whatever the surrounding culture wanted or the ruling power dictated. But there have been times when the Christian church swam against the tide because it heard a subversive voice from within its guiding story, which prompted a different response to the world. One figure who superbly represents this Christian response is Archbishop Desmond Tutu who as he ended his public career at 79 years of age said:

"There's nothing more radical, nothing more revolutionary, nothing more subversive against injustice and oppression than the Bible. If you want to keep people subjugated, the last thing you place in their hands is a Bible." (Source: Christian Post)

We live in the light of figures such as Tutu and Bonhoeffer and the idea of the Bible as a subversive book may not strike us as new or unusual, but there are plenty of examples of how the Bible was not seen in that way. We know the church has been caught by giving priority in its life to the voices other than the word of God, sometimes for the sake of having a greater share of position and power.

The reading from Jeremiah has a subversive edge. It is a pastoral letter written to the people taken into exile in Babylon where they were subject to the wiles of false prophets who down played the crisis and falsely predicted an early return home. The letter reflects the same mixture of negative and positive actions that characterise Jeremiah's whole work. He wrote in order to help people now in an alien context find what it meant to live in faith and hope. They were rather like the Asylum Seekers we know who set about starting a new life among us, with little or no hope of returning home. Bereft of land, possessions, the Temple and the symbols that supported their life and faith the people could easily have escaped into bitterness and despair, or false idealism. But using the positive verbs of his calling Jeremiah counselled them to live in their new reality: "Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat the produce, marry and give in marriage, multiply and do not decrease". He called the people to embrace exile. They were to refuse false hopes and develop a sustainable community life as aliens. Precisely in a situation of hopelessness, God called the people to be open to new possibilities and a future they could not predict.

The suffering of exile did not end in historical death for the people. Instead it became a matrix in which God's promises brought forth a profound newness among them. Away from Jerusalem the portable components of their religious life developed a new and sustaining significance. Theologically they reflected on the beliefs of the Babylonians and revised their scriptures and their Psalms to celebrate new insights in their faith. In exile they continued to be subject to the promises of God, continued to live in faith and hope, shone their light amongst the nations, and emerged to be God's peculiar people once more when the long awaited return became possible.

This is challenging enough, but Jeremiah said two other things that were surprising and subversive: "*Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon*" [29:4]. Exile was not the result of a weak army or bad diplomacy, nor was it a sign that the Lord of hosts was ineffective, or had been defeated. In some strange way the uprooting of the people from Jerusalem and their transfer to Babylon remained within the sovereign purposes of God. Their suffering and loss did not mean they had moved beyond the promises of God. They may have hated the Babylonians but God did not see it that way and Jeremiah counselled them to give positive attention to their overlords. "*Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare*" [29:7]. The word for welfare here is shalom: the peace of God, which encompasses grace, peace, blessing, justice, wellbeing and reconciliation. Shalom was the gift, and shalom was the task the people had to manifest among the Babylonians. Life as aliens did not mean living with hearts filled with hate or emptied in despair. Nor did it mean withdrawing into the safety of a ghetto or practicing faith in secret. The people were called to work for the peace of the city, and pray for their enemies because their life together was inextricably linked within the sovereignty of God. In this parish we are always thinking about what mission is, and here is another paradigm to note. Peace is the gift and Peace is the task: we can build a rich theology of mission on this theme.

The graphic on the Order of Service of a man chained is meant to reflect both the exile and the situation of Paul in prison, as he writes to Timothy. The burden of Paul's message is that he may be chained, but the Gospel is not. He writes to call Timothy and his congregation back to the core of the faith, which ironically is the very thing that has landed him in prison. Because of this prison was not a shameful thing for Paul. Nor was it a place where he gave up all he stood for. From prison he continued to be his eccentric self and lived in the subversive power of faith and hope. He wrote pastoral letters to churches in need and won others to the Peace of Christ in which he rejoiced to live. In prison and in exile Paul and the people in Babylon stayed focussed on faith and hope and their circumstances became transformative.

It was John Henry Newman who pointed out that in the days when the Roman Empire was collapsing and the structures and ethos of life was up for grabs, silent men and women were seen settling in the countryside, working in the forests, building, cultivating, praying, reflecting on scripture and studiously copying manuscripts they had saved from the devastation. They were people inspired by the example of St Benedict and his Rule. They did not descend into despair, but quietly went about their eccentric business of praising God and witnessing to a sovereignty that runs counter to the other sovereignties that impose themselves upon us. New communities grew that were free of the problems of the past. Slowly they were joined to other communities by roads and bridges restored after the havoc of the Vandals and Goths.

The power to behave in this way came from the steady reflection on the Church's guiding story, which proclaims the gift of Peace and the task of Peace and new structures for church and community life were born.

Many see our time as one in which the church lives as resident aliens in a culture antagonistic to its goals. There is some truth in this. We are lucky because the church has a long history through which it has access to powerful, subversive memories. Through its liturgy and reflections on scripture the church is capable of telling the story of our creation as a people with a purpose. In order to survive in our time, the church, like the people in Babylon, must remain willing to go about its eccentric business of reflecting on this story, living by it, and trusting the one at the heart of its message whose name is Emmanuel: "God with us". The presence of this name means there is a purpose to the human project that reaches beyond present cultural trends and the false sovereignties in which we are pressured to live. And the good news is, this name has the power to redeem us by turning us out from ourselves.
