

Pentecost 24
7/11/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Haggai 1:15b – 2:9

Psalm 145

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

Sermon preached by Rev. Chris Mostert

Theme ‘Indeed, they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.’ (Luke 20:36)

[A] Introduction

Three weeks from the beginning of Advent, we are approaching the end of the Christian year. At this time our thoughts are directed toward Christian hope; not only the hope of the coming of Christ, but also the hope we have for the ultimate future. Our reading from the Gospel today, focussing on our hope for each person’s future in God, names this as the hope that we shall be ‘children of God’, ‘children of the resurrection’.

Christian faith is very much about living life in the grace of God as disciples of Jesus Christ; very much focussed on life in what we call the real world. It is not about ‘pie in the sky when we die’. In the creed we say weekly (the Nicene Creed) we affirm that ‘we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come’. Today’s Gospel reading invites us to think about this.

[B] Jesus’ words about resurrection

Jesus is challenged by a group of Sadducees, one of the religious parties in Judaism at the time. They were a priestly, aristocratic group, whose ideas contrasted sharply with those of the Pharisees. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

They come to Jesus with a question, a trick-question, intended to ridicule belief in the resurrection of the dead. A woman marries seven brothers, who all die; whose wife will she be in the resurrection? One commentator says that ‘the power and prestige of the Sadducees insulates them from the pain implied in this tawdry tale of a woman passed from one brother to another, never finding the security of a home.’

In reply, Jesus makes a couple of points.

(1) He distinguishes between this age and the coming age. In this age people marry; of course, not everyone. In the coming age, in which our existence is transformed, people will not marry! We will have a different kind of body, like that of the angels; there will be no more death, and so there is no procreation.

(2) When we die we do not fall out of relationship with God. God is the God of those who have died as much as those who live; in God the dead still live. With reference to the patriarchs, long since dead, Jesus says that God is the God of the living. God remains in relationship with us, in our dying and beyond our death in the new life of the resurrection. We are – and we remain – children of God. In God’s future kingdom of glory we will be alive to God, more so than ever; we will be children of the resurrection.

[C] God's victory over death

When Jesus says that God is not a God of the dead but of the living, this does not mean that God has forgotten those who have died. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, we believe that God overcomes the grim reality of death. As Paul said, the victory will not be with death; the sting of death will not be the last word.

Death is, of course, a boundary, most often – though not always – a terrible boundary. We should not under-estimate its power to create havoc in our lives; to bring our whole world crumbling down. In death a life comes to an end and we have to come to terms with the terrible truth that the person who has died will speak no more, love no more, no longer take his/her place at our table (in our bed), no longer converse with us, except through words remembered, no longer ask us questions or give answers to our questions.

The story of our lives has its place in the all-encompassing story – the grand narrative – of God's involvement with the world. The narrative begins with the creation of a world. It includes the experience of brokenness, failure, things going wrong, pain and suffering.

It goes on to tell of the incarnation, of God dealing with humankind in its turning away from God, its hostility or indifference to God, its preference for darkness over light. God engages with this situation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He is Immanuel, 'God with us'! He proclaims and enacts God's reign as something already present.

The story doesn't end there; the first Christians looked to a time when what had begun in the resurrection of Jesus would be completed, for themselves and the whole of creation. There would be a transformation for the creation, from something incomplete and perishable to something complete and imperishable.

So the narrative of what the early Greek theologians called the '*economy* of salvation' does not end with the picture of a cosmic graveyard, where everything simply is no more. At the centre of this story of God's great scheme of redemption is the resurrection of Jesus. On this basis we have hope that we shall be raised with him and like him; that we are children of the resurrection. Being finite and mortal creatures, our lives are subject to death. It is possible for us to come to terms with death, to accept our subjection to it; many people do. But it is not in our power to *overcome* death; only God can do that. Christian hope is finally hope in God. It is God who creates new possibilities out of the old, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (Rom 4:17)

[D] Being children of the resurrection

What does it mean, then, to be children of the resurrection? Perhaps two things.

(1) It means that we read the Scriptures with a '*resurrection hermeneutic*'; ie. with openness to hearing the promise of God. We read the *world* differently. We live in hope that beyond the chaos and turbulence of the present time God's reign in and over all things will come unambiguously and incontrovertibly in the fulness of time.

We hope for the end of this age and the beginning of the new age; the end of time and the coming of eternity; the end of brokenness and the coming of wholeness, the end of separation from God, from each other and from the truth of our existence and the completion of our reconciliation with God, with each other and with the truth of our being. This will be the world in which God is truly worshipped and glorified, and in which God delights.

(2) We also read *ourselves* and each other differently; not as people for whom sin and death are the last word but people who will be liberated from the power of sin and will come through death to resurrection. We look for the fulfilment of the promise that those who are in Christ are a new creation; for the completion of what has already happened in an anticipatory way in our baptism: our dying with Christ and our rising with him.

As Christians, our hope is not for a natural immortality. We do not hope for the release, at death, of a part of us called the ‘soul’, either to be joined together with a whole host of disembodied souls in heaven or to be joined again, in an endless cycle, with another body in time and space. In short, our hope is neither for the immortality of the soul nor for reincarnation.

What we hope for as Christians is that we shall be made alive with Christ to a new life: a life in which all enmities will be overcome, all hurts healed, all injustices put right; in short, all sins forgiven and the power of sin destroyed. It is a grand hope! Many do not share it. But it is not just wishful thinking! It is a hope grounded in the promise of Jesus and in the reality of his resurrection.

[E] Living in the present with this hope

Does this hope of being children of the resurrection make any difference to our life here and now? It does! For the things we hope for are already real for us to some degree – by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, which makes life different already for those who believe this and who know the power of this resurrection life through the Spirit. Already we know the reality of reconciliation with God. Already we know renewal in our lives. Already we know the freedom of forgiveness, both received and given.

We know these things in some measure, even if we also know the reality of failure, of falling short, of estrangement, of being in the grip of anger or hatred or destructiveness. We are still on the road; we haven’t yet reached the end of the journey. We are not yet what we shall be; and who of us is not painfully aware of this from time to time, indeed all the time. Our feet are still firmly planted in the old age, with its trials and failures, its pains and sorrows. But we also know the power of the new age, the power of resurrection! Imagine where we might be if this good news had never reached our ears!

The hope of resurrection – the hope of a transformed and renewed world, the hope of transformed and glorified lives – is not only for the future but already shines its light ahead of it now! We experience it, though not consistently; it’s not ‘in the bag’. It still eludes us. But in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we have already seen the shape of what God has in store for us. And if we have seen this, life cannot stay the same!

The power of death and destruction in the world is strong; there is a lot of pessimism about the future of the world. Many people know only despair and hopelessness. And many in our time feel that nothing really matters and nothing really means anything.

But the church lives in such a world with hope and therefore with courage. We ourselves know that there is another word that has to be spoken to this situation and that people need to hear.

The final word is not with death, but with resurrection; not with nothingness, but with the glory of God, and with humankind fully alive, as 'children of the resurrection'.

Thanks and praise be to God, our creator and redeemer, our beginning and our end.
