

Epiphany 8
27/02/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 49:8 –16a

Psalms 131

1 Corinthians 1:1 – 5

Matthew 6:24 - 34

Sermon preached by Rev. John Hudson

Earthquake, flood and fire, are recent horrific events that surely make a mockery of our Lord's call not to be anxious, or not to worry about what is needful, when facing catastrophic, or even mundane, issues of life. In the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus says 'do not worry' surely he can't be serious! After all, our very life is at stake here. What he says may be alright for 1st Century village life, but unrealistic in the sophisticated world of the 21st Century. So, if you think that about Jesus' words in this reading, then you have to make the same judgement about everything else he says. This is not an appeal to some literalist, fundamentalist, understanding of the words of Jesus or the text of the Bible, but to see our Lord's summons as a radical call to life in God the Father's realm, or kingdom; and to see Him, that is Jesus, not us, as central to understanding and living such a life.

The modern-world-thinker is prone to believe he or she can make a judgement, based on this or that "way of thinking" as to what makes sense of Jesus' words, and life. This has led to the absurdity of thinking we can employ a selective rejection of Jesus' teaching but still pray the Lord's Prayer. This is where Modern and Postmodern worlds meet. Based on their own judgement, some of what Jesus says is in, and some is out; depending on their point of view as to what constitutes truth and reality, for the individual.

But the non-believing world is not rejected by Jesus, for even as he teaches his disciples on the mountain side, the crowd (the world) is present; and whether it knows it or not the world will be free to wait for the coming of the Kingdom, in its own way.

The particular call to the disciples is not to a greater self consciousness, self awareness, or self fulfilment. In fact it is quite the opposite; it is a call to self forgetfulness. Jesus has to teach his disciples and us, how to pray and what to pray for, and to live a life of freedom in the Gospel where the only future we are concerned about is the one we are called into through God's leading. Thinking God's way, or as Paul says, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). This is why Paul, in today's 1st Corinthians reading, is able to bear the criticisms and judgements of a church that boasts of its superior spiritual wisdom. So free in Christ is he, that he does not need to boast of his own superior credentials, for he knows that he lives out of the gift of God who has formed and continues to form him into the configuration of the crucified and risen Lord. His life, our life, is not in ourselves. Unencumbered therefore with self- preoccupation we are genuinely free to love and serve the world.

So, as we pray for the world, we learn how to get our prayers right. We pray to the one whom Jesus has made known; not god in general but a very particular God...Our Father...whose name we first hallow, and pray for the coming of His kingdom. Then and only then do we pray for our daily bread, bread for the world, and our sustenance for the tomorrow of the new age God is leading us to. Now, just when we thought we can ask for a few perks that should come to us as “insider-prayers” we are told to forgive , as if we have done something wrong !!! Again it is the prayer offered to the Church to pray in the name of the One who forgave His enemies and those who spitefully used Him. And to pray “not to be lead into temptation” is to admit before God that we are not captains of our own souls, not seeing every moral choice as an opportunity to test our self-conscious strength. Rather we pray in the strength of the One who did battle for us against evil and prevailed.

There is a natural way of praying which is filled with anxiety and desperation, especially in time of crisis. Understandably, human prayer that is directed somewhere to someone is often filled with unanswered questions of “why is this happening to me?”... “Where is god?”...etc, etc. Recently, a friend told me, in the midst of her grief, that she had prayed to “the universe” for consolation. Whatever wonder of the starry heavens may have prompted this prayer, it seems there was no consolation to be found in silence of space. Nature cannot respond to nature when it comes to prayer, for such prayer is a projection of our own wistful hopes or fears into an unknown and capricious universe. A hopeful prayer is one offered in a community that knows the Name of the One through whom we pray; the church that has been taught, by her Lord, to pray for us when we feel we cannot pray for ourselves and a world that does not even know or care that it is being prayed for.

The prayer that Jesus taught is not natural, it does not spring readily to our lips, because its origin is not in our hearts. But therein lies our encouragement and hope, for it relies upon receiving it as gift from one who cares infinitely beyond human capacity. That’s what the prophet Isaiah says in today’s OT reading. The people of God say “the Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me” Isa.49:14. But the response from the Lord who listens to the prayers of God’s people, says “can a woman forget her nursing child,...the child of her womb? Even these may forget yet I will not forget you. See I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands”

In a few moments we will gather at the Lord’s Table, where the Lord Himself will welcome us with palms bearing the marks of his suffering and death, and through His Spirit reminding us of the cost of our redemption and consequently, the cost of our discipleship. He thinks of us and for us, saying ‘It is I, be not afraid’.
