

Lent 2
20/03/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 12:1 – 4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1 – 5, 13 - 17

John 3:1 - 17

Lent – Theodicy - Vocation

Sermon Preached by Rev. Deacon Gavin Blakemore

As a young child on Christmas day 1974 I remember being glued to our black and white television and watching with horror the devastating impact of cyclone Tracy on Darwin. I remember this vividly as this was the first time I came into contact with the destructive powers of natural disasters. Of course as a young child one of my first worries and questions to my parents was “could this happen here in Melbourne” and “did Santa still deliver toys to the children of Darwin”?

Over this last week we have all watched with a sense of anxiety the latest natural disaster of the massive earthquakes and tsunami in Japan and worry not just of the major devastation and lives lost but of the potential harm of a nuclear power plant meltdown and possible atomic explosion? This is of course falls hot on the heels of a string of natural disasters starting with droughts, fire, floods and cyclones in Australia as well as earthquakes in New Zealand.

President elect of the Uniting Church, Andrew Dutney recently published a paper entitled “Does God hate Queensland?” (this was before the disasters in NZ and Japan). In attempting to make sense of the catastrophic summer here in Australia, he is asked the theodicy question of “if God is all good and powerful, why do the innocent suffer?”

He summarises two broad kinds of theodicy: one which says with Augustine that the creation fell from perfection with Adam; the others says with Irenaeus that the world began in an immature state, and that suffering is necessary for us to mature. He points out that “*Theodicy works for some but not all cases. There are far too many examples of suffering which are so grotesque or so excessive that they make it impossible to devise an explanation that is both rational and morally tolerable. In any case, it would be offensive even to try to explain such suffering away.*”

He also makes the very important point that ordinary Christians haven’t gone all the way with the some theologians in trying to justify God’s ways. Rather for them, the experience of suffering does not challenge belief in God as such, but rather forces the question, “*Where in this suffering is the God in whom I believe*”?

Dutney says “*theodicy has a limited place*”. The scriptures allow far more **lament** than we have sometimes allowed for ourselves in our worship services. Old Testament scholars would tell us to thumb through the Psalms for example upon example, or read Lamentations.

In the floods in Brisbane, people were bowled over by the number of people who came to help. And **community** is another discovery in disaster: *“It turns out that our possessions are less important than our family, friends and neighbours. It turns out that we can trust strangers to enter our (shattered) homes and deal gently with our treasures – in fact we rely on them to do so. It turns out that my neighbours need does matter more to me than my own in this situation. It turns out that sitting in the rubble of the lives that we’d worked so hard to create we can laugh and experience genuine joy in the inexplicable gift of being alive – together. It turns out that when we look up and see what natural disaster means in Haiti and Pakistan we do recognize in a new way the responsibilities – the opportunities to help – that go with the advantages enjoyed by Australians even in times of devastation. Who knew?”*

However none of this justifies or minimises human suffering. But we survive—and we survive together.

In some small way there is something of a parallel in this movement from the normal being interjected by something large and unavoidable that if sat with in the Spirit can take us to new places that deepen our relationship with God.

This is the journey of Lent and was certainly the case for Nicodemus in today’s gospel passage. Here this Pharisee and leader of the Jews comes to Jesus in recognising the signs that Jesus performs as linking him somehow to God. He is confronted by Jesus response that no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again or above. He misunderstands and does not understand how he can be literally born again.

Jesus responds again to clear this up, “No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit”. Jesus is now linking the human experience of baptism of water by John the Baptist with the gift of the Spirit from God.

New Testament commentator Francis Maloney argues that the “Kingdom of God” phrase which in other places refers to the eschatological, is actually for the Johanine community a more realized understanding of the Christian experience. That is in the baptism by water and the gift of the Spirit from God, the new believer joins the community of believers bound by Christian belief and practice and thus enters the Kingdom of God. The gospel writer goes on to explain that God’s love for the world was such that he sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world, not to condemn it but in order to subvert it and save it from itself.

This Lenten season calls us to ask again,

- have I lived up to those baptism promises?
- how is my relationship with God?
- have I allowed the Holy Spirit to work in my life?
- how might I repent of my sin and turn again to God?

Can I move from the darkness of Nicodemus at this point and into the light? It is worth recalling that Nicodemus does appear again after Jesus lifting up on the cross and his death. He comes by night with mryyh and alloes to prepare Jesus body for burial according the Jewish custom.

During Lent 2011 we are also being asked to reassess our community services vocation in living out this called to life as a community of believers. As most of you are aware Hotham Mission recently published this report called “2010- Community Services Needs Assessment”. In it is a theological framework for Hotham Mission, some social analysis of our neighbourhoods and the description of some 31 areas of community need.

Two weeks back some 15 people from across the parish gathered at the Centre for Theology and Ministry to discuss this report and spend considerable time asking questions and sharing stories. This included some initial discernment of the needs presented in preparation for the 2nd workshop next Saturday the 26th March.

Your input is now required. We are in the serious business of ranking mission needs for community service for Christ Church Kensington and Mark the Evangelist which together make Hotham Parish. This is your chance to have a say and exercise your Lenten calling to discern our communal vocation and mission priorities. It is part of our discipleship as Christians to do as the liturgy says when it sends us out each week with “Go in peace to love and **serve** the Lord”. In being fed by the word and sacrament, how do we respond to a world of need and suffering?

As the people of God in this community who will we serve and how will we do it? We don't have unlimited resources of buildings, money and people but we are blessed with a richness many other churches do not have.

Please read the report from the first workshop (put up), as this details all the feedback, discussion and first round ranking.

This is your chance to have a say and either fill in a response with those priorities you would like to promote and to attend the next workshop and put your case. These workshops are our form of wrestling like Nicodemus, as we sit in the discomfort of the wilderness of Lent and listen for the call of God for us to be servants in this neighbourhood.

Let us hear the call of God on our lives to live out our baptism as Disciples of Christ. May you rest in the presence of the God, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Amen.
