

Lent 4
3/04/2011

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 16:1 - 13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8 – 14
John 9:1 - 41

The man who had never seen the light meets the Light of life

On September 12, 2001, the British Newspaper the *Guardian* published an article that said:

[Up to now] many of us saw religion as harmless nonsense. Beliefs might lack supporting evidence but, we thought, if people needed a crutch for consolation, where's the harm? September 11 changed all that. Revealed faith is not harmless nonsense, it can be lethally dangerous nonsense. Dangerous because it gives people unshakeable confidence in their own righteousness. Dangerous because it gives them false courage to kill themselves, which automatically removes normal barriers to killing others. Dangerous, because it teaches enmity to others [who are] labelled only by a difference of an inherited tradition. And dangerous because we have all bought into a weird respect, which uniquely protects religion from normal criticism. Let's now stop being so damned respectful. (Christian Century, January 11, 2011, p 30)

The author of these words is the atheist Richard Dawkins. While the target of his criticism is a debased form of Islam, his words are a challenge for all faiths. And they are equally a challenge to secular versions of faith such as scientific rationalism, political or economic ideologies, all of which have the potential to become closed, fanatical systems. The irony is Dawkins' criticism of religion sits easily with much to be found in the prophets, and in the Gospels. Remember Isaiah's stern word from the Lord:

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. [Isaiah 58:3b – 4]

And in Matthew [23:13; 23] Jesus says: *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in your selves, and when others are going in you stop them! ...you tithe mint, dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.*

Such criticism within our tradition has not ceased even to our own day, and the irony is that faithful people don't believe in the god or the religion that is the object of Richard Dawkins' venom.

It has yet to be demonstrated how much theology Dawkins knows, but we know that although they approached the subject differently, theologians such as Paul Tillich, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer all treated "religion" with suspicion because of its capacity to take on a form that was a travesty of faith, a cause for error, and a burden to its adherents.

In words that echo the story of the Fall Barth said that religion became the reverse of faith because it involved ...grasping: *[Humans] try to grasp at the truth by [themselves] ...and do not do what [they] have to do when the truth comes to [them]*. [*Church Dogmatics*, quoted in *Christian Century*, Jan 11, 2011 p 30]. The argument hinges on whether faith involves trust in a transcendent reality that defies definition, or whether faith involves us limiting transcendent reality to something we can understand and control – our “own” religion. The task is to live with knowing God is present: and is witnessed to in religious practices of liturgy, preaching, prayer and meditation, but cannot be bound by our definitions.

Bonhoeffer said the Tower of Babel symbolized what he meant by religion: humans building themselves up to reach heaven in their own strength. He contrasted this with the Day of Pentecost in which the Holy Spirit reached down to a waiting community and raised them up to new life as God’s people, empowered by a reality that was beyond their grasp. St Paul said: *we see through a glass darkly* because what we are looking at is out of reach at present. And St Augustine said: *If you think you understand, its not God you are talking about*. This approach to dealing with faith in the revelation of God is background that helps us hear the story of the man who had never seen the light until he met the Light of the world who gave him the light of life.

There are two overarching ideas that help unpack this reading: one is that it reflects a point in the journey of the Jewish Christians in John’s community of faith when they were being ostracised and cast out from Synagogues because of their confession of faith in Christ. The interrogation of the parents of the man born blind suggests this, as does the casting out of the man himself. Unfortunately, in the history of the church, such texts have been used to promote anti-semitism. We cannot support this: all the characters in the story are Jews: the clash is between the leaders, who resist Christ and the man who receives him.

The second overarching idea is that Jesus’ presence at the beginning of the text, his long absence and then his return to seek out the man born blind, is a reference to Christ’s first and second coming. As such it reflects the hope that, just as the man who received his sight did not seek to be healed but was the recipient of a sheer act of grace through Christ, so the Risen and Ascended one would come again to seek out his flock to shepherd them towards the light of life.

The man born blind did not suddenly come to faith on the basis of a random act of kindness. His answers evolve in a crescendo: **the man Jesus did it... he is a prophet... if this man were not from God he could do nothing!** Finally: **Lord, I believe!**

The mostly hostile questions of the interrogators are really about Jesus but they lead to a gradual awakening in the man. The process of deepening insight it began with an action that echoed God’s creation of us from the dust of the earth, it was followed by washing, the sign of our re-creation in the waters of Baptism and it concludes with the gift of faith in the heart when Jesus found the man as an outcast and declared his identity. This was not a moment of intellectual illumination: it was the moment of the bestowal of life, as in the gift of living water, and the bread of life.

Meanwhile those with all the advantages of faith and training demonstrated their confidence in their own righteousness when they called Jesus a sinner and asked: *You don't mean to say we are blind?* When the light shone amongst them it exposed the darkness of closed minds, legalism and rigidity. If you were blind, says Jesus, it would be OK. The judgement against you is you say: "we see". Even though you have eyes, you are clearly blind. The leadership had a firm grasp on the tradition. Disability was due to sin, healing cannot occur on the Sabbath. Transcendence was limited to reality that was understandable and controllable in their terms so that faith had become chains to shackle the power of God rather than open doorways to illumination and life.

John's Gospel is hard for Church people. It repeatedly shows that those who are schooled in things of the faith are no better off when it comes to being open to receive the light that comes from Christ, not least because it illuminates the fact that we are in danger of being confident of our own righteousness and are not looking for what Christ brings. The story of the man who had never seen the light is an explanation of the text: *This is the judgement, that light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light...* [Jn 3:19].

John's Gospel witnesses that to see the truth as it is in Christ is to find ourselves welcomed by God through the healing presence Jesus. It is to be empowered by the Spirit whose coming he promises and whose gift illuminates his meaning. And it is to find ourselves at home as ourselves in the world that he loved, even though we may be outcasts as far as the Richard Dawkins of the world are concerned.

Lent is a time to reflect on the renewal of our obedience. That means it is a time to examine where we have placed our hopes. Is it in our own confidence, knowledge and self-trust, where God hardly has a place? Or is it in our ready admission of our need for the good gifts God alone can give, which are bread of life, living water, light for the world?
