

Lent 5
10/04/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Ezekiel 37:1 - 14

Psalms 130

Romans 8:6 – 11

John 11:1 - 45

All my hope on God is founded: living in the power and miracle of hope

Imagination is a word with a mixed history. The translators of the King James Bible used the word *imagination* to express the meaning of six different words, and in each case the sense was pejorative. The reason seems to be because of some connection between imagination and magic or superstition, or because imagination was seen as a purely human quality that tended to lead away from God. Many philosophers had negative things to say about imagination, but Hegel's was the most damning for faith: "Theism in all its forms is an imaginative distortion of final truth" [Richardson and Bowden, p 283]. On the other side of the discussion Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and others who followed him, said imagination was the faculty that allowed those made in the image of God to enquire into God and the creation, and that works of an aesthetic nature were thought to be divinely inspired. In our day imagination has gained an unprecedented place in theology as the root of the theologian's work in which she tries to gather together in a single metaphor the complexity of God's presence.

Walter Brueggemann is a theologian who has espoused the idea of prophetic imagination. For him it is akin to an earthquake: it cracks open reality in such a way that we are confronted with impossible possibilities. Hopes and yearnings, long denied or suppressed, are permitted to surface and live. The primary ingredient of prophetic imagination is hope, which Brueggemann says most often arises out of a situation of grief and loss. Genuine hope therefore is subversive: it runs against the grain of its context, refusing to accept the majority opinion that passes for reality. When hope is received rather than denied it enables us to take risks: to dare to do what we would never have thought of doing [Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 1982].

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is an excellent example of prophetic imagination. In a context of the exile in Babylon, where all thought of future life at home had begun to perish, the prophet was given a vision of what looks like a former battlefield: the valley of dry bones. This scene of utter decay becomes the foundation of an invitation to the people to live in hope. There would be a return home; their name would live again in history. This Spirit inspired vision is a sign of God's restoring and renovating power at work, anticipating the day when the Spirit would be poured out for all people, bringing life where death and despair otherwise reigned supreme. To live in hope means making a decision to dispose of the belief that life will always be subject to chaos, oppression, barrenness, exile and despair.

Hope is the primary prophetic idiom, not because of the consensus of history, or because of the signs of the times. But because the Prophet speaks for God to a people who are challenged to learn afresh that the sovereign power of God is for them, which means that life will triumph over death. The ministry of the Prophets was to bring people back to this reference point of faith, which rejects the world as a closed, managed system where the laws of science are the last word about truth, or the majority opinion rules. The prophets spoke in a particular context, but their grasp of reality as grounded in God means their word is a word for this day, and for all days.

The raising of Lazarus is a prophetic action, which reveals the possibility of life where none was expected. It is the most dramatic of Jesus' raisings in the Gospels, but it is not the first. Jairus' daughter who was dying was raised [Mark 5: 22]. On his way to be buried the widow of Nain's son was raised [Luke 7:12]. Here, in contrast Jesus earned the wrath of his friends by deliberately delaying his visit to Bethany until the fourth day. This means there is no possibility Lazarus is sleeping. This is real death and decay, but there are important differences between Lazarus' resuscitation, and Jesus' resurrection. The cemetery workers remove the rock. Lazarus is still bound when he emerges from the tomb. He needs his friends to help him before he is free. In John, at the Resurrection of Jesus no human help is needed, the rock is already removed and his grave cloths are carefully left behind where he lay. Jesus is clothed in the glory of God but in due course Lazarus will know his grave clothes and his tomb again.

Lazarus' resuscitation can be understood as a proclamation of what declared in the Prologue of John: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God... All things came into being through him* [1:1-3]. In Jesus the power of life is at work in the world. When we read John's Gospel we find water turned to wine, living water given to those who thirst for life, those born blind who suddenly see the light. Lazarus' resuscitation is a demonstration of John 5:21: *Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes.* The power that is in Jesus is the same as the power that created the world. St Augustine says: *"if all things were made by him, what wonder is it that one was raised by him? ... if he can raise one, he can raise all... this will be his work at the end of time... [Homilies on John].* For us, life receives its meaning and hope from the proclamation of the Resurrection. This is not a worldly hope. It is hope based on what the Spirit has shown us about God, present in the Word made flesh who lived among us, gifting us with the Spirit of life, even as our bodies continue to decay.

Prophetic imagination is like an earthquake that cracks open reality in such a way that we are confronted with impossible possibilities. As we know only too well from recent events, there are many reactions to such a shake up. Disbelief, devastation, desperate attempts to conceal the whole truth, despair, heroic resolve to make good, genuine acts of courage and compassion and, sad to say, opportunism that exploits other people's loss.

The fourteenth century artist Giotto has a series of frescoes in 'the Arena Chapel' in Padua, one of which depicts the raising of Lazarus. Giotto vividly captures the range of responses of the crowd, from the disciples, the cemetery attendants to the good people of Bethany. Some are oblivious, some are skeptical, some seem unmoved and disinterested, reminding us of Jesus's words in Luke's story of the rich man who lived with poor Lazarus at his gate: *if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone would rise from the dead* [Lk 16:31].

Just beyond where our reading ended, we read that the raising of Lazarus inspired the plot to kill Jesus. The hymn writer wrote:

*Why, what has my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run,
He gave the blind their sight.
Sweet injuries!
Yet they at these
themselves displease
and 'gainst him rise.*

*They rise and needs will have
my dear Lord made away
a murderer they save,
the Prince of life the slay... [TiS 341]*

The biblical witness is that, from Creation to Calvary humans repeatedly refuse the offer of life, and turn against God. *...He came to his own, and his own did not accept him him...* [Jn 1:10]

But what makes the difference is that in the Resurrection of Jesus we see that he who came from God for us, was owned by God, for us. By this act of grace we see that death, in all its forms, is not the last word. In Jesus life is given to the world, despite its enmity with God, making it possible to find life in his name. That is why resurrection joy is the foundation of all Christian worship, even in the season of Lent, the season of penitence and discipline: Thanks be to God.
