

Easter 6
29/05/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 17:22-32

Psalm 66

I Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

Yesterday's texts for tomorrow

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

Three short texts, one from each reading:

The conclusion of Paul's sermon on the Areopagus:

'When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed....' (Acts 17: 32)

And from the Epistle of Peter:

'Keep your conscience clear, so that when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.' (1 Peter 3: 16)

And from the Gospel:

'This is the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor knows him.'

The escalating revolt of our society against its Christian roots yields at least one positive – it should make us aware of how much we have in common with the texts before us each week. So it is again this morning. The chasm between what we are about here and what goes on 'out there' has arguably not been greater since the second century. If this be the case, then we can learn much from each of these ancient texts.

What they throw up for us is the depth of the problem – a problem that has been concealed for most of us of a certain age since our formative years. We have come from a world which for the majority of our citizens, except for a hardened few, rested comfortably with the notion that the Christian faith was probably true, even if 'going to Church' was not a high priority - except for the requisite cricket, tennis or youth club special services. It was a world in which on Monday mornings in the local papers one could read a digest of a previous morning or evening's sermon; where religious instruction, even if of dubious quality, was taken for granted, or where a Church wedding or a funeral presided over by an ordained minister was virtually mandatory.

How quickly the scene has changed. We need not detain ourselves with illustrations apparent to us all. We simply note the ever increasing vitriol contained in the Letters to the Editor about "religion", or the not unsympathetic lament from the front page of 'The Sunday Age' of some weeks ago: 'An Easter Miracle: Children who know their Bible Stories', even when it then went on to offer this extraordinary sentence from a high profile sociologist from Latrobe University: 'The need for spiritual orientation is not about our beliefs: it goes deeper, and is existential rather than theological'. Did nobody laugh? Even at the end of a first semester, a first year theology student would fail if they came up with that. And the clever ones insist that *we* are irrational!

In the light of all this, imagine Paul preaching from the hypothetical Areopagus of Federation Square: *'Melburnians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way...'* I think not. More likely, he might flirt with the converse: *'Melburnians, I see how non-religious you are in every way.'* But that would be no more likely to achieve his goal either.

Which perhaps invites us to a deeper investigation of what has sometimes been held up as a model sermon for preachers: start where the people are! But it didn't work. Start where the people are, and you won't get an unequivocal hearing for Easter which is, of course, for Christian faith itself:

'When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed' - although we hear that others were somewhat intrigued.

Now if the texts are reliable, the truth is that Paul never engaged in such a pursuit again. If we were to immerse ourselves in the various illustrations of his approach from his own letters - rather than by means of the reported speech as we have it here from Luke's pen in Acts - then we find nothing like this sermon anywhere. For invariably his concern is always to differentiate the gospel from its competing imposters; he never constructs a case by making the surrounding culture the jumping off place. Of course, here and there he makes 'off the cuff' cultural allusions - for example the sort of aside today reflecting the doctrines of Stoic philosophy: *'In him we live and move and have our being'*. Or again when he writes to the Corinthians: *'Greeks seek wisdom and Jews look for a sign'*. But nowhere does Paul engage in a full blown cultural analysis since he understands that there is never a compelling path from culture to gospel. This Athenian sermon demonstrates beyond dispute: the journey from identifying an 'unknown God' to advance the case for Easter day will always be problematic:

'When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed...'

Scoffing is relatively harmless, but the horizon darkens when we come to the Epistle of Peter; not so much scoffing as *'when you are maligned...'*. Let us take note of the conjunction: *'when'* you are maligned, not *'if'*. What we have here is a text seeking to instruct a Christian community in the implications of its baptism. The writer does this by way of a comparison between the water of Noah's Flood and baptismal water, between the eight people in the Ark, and the salvation of the newly baptised. The fact is that these newly baptised, preoccupied by their admission to all the privileges of the people of God, need to be reminded that the waters will be rough. They have to reckon with what they are in for.

For most of Western history, of course, this text has seemed like an exaggeration. After all, Christianity after the reign of the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century was a religion of winners, not losers. But for those of us inhabiting what we presumptuously call the first world, long standing culturally benign days are rapidly departing. With this text we sense ourselves entering at long last into its realistic prediction:

"When you are maligned, keep your conscience pure".

Scoffers in Athens; disparagers in what today we call Turkey – why should we be surprised by the blunt word of the gospel explaining why all this is the case? *‘The Father will give you another Advocate to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor knows him.’* How far are we here from the confident opening: *“Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are”*, to this sober necessity of *“a Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees nor knows him”*.

So here we have these three distinctive texts come together in today’s lectionary: from the Athenians scoffing of the fundamental claim of the gospel, to an alerting of the baptised to their certain abuse, to a decisive ‘no’ to the world’s ability to receive the gospel unaided.

At the very least, we are being told that it is very hard to be more realistic than the New Testament, or the Old for that matter, as the Psalm today concludes:

‘For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net, you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water’

That is the bad news – people ‘riding over our heads’ identified for us as ‘a scoffing’ and ‘a maligning’. But the good news follows in the conclusion of the Psalm as a pledge of redemption: *“yet you have brought us out to a spacious place”*.

Between Easter day and Pentecost which today is where we find ourselves, what is this “spacious place” but the assurance that the Spirit which the world cannot receive will dwell in the Christian community as we seek to be faithful? But just here further clouds are massing. It may be one thing for the world to be unable to receive the truth, but of much greater dismay is the real danger that the very conditions for the existence of future faithful communities are being undermined from within as much as without, and this less than subtly and with increasing disdain.

For example, in this month’s Crosslight one contributor, a doctor in the Church no less, writes:

‘The cross represents the true defeat of evil – not through the intervention of a half divine/ half human ‘Christ’ (Christ in inverted commas, for good measure) sent by an interventionist God to be sacrifice for sin....’

Half divine/ half human? Such beings are the heroes and demigods of ancient Greece and Rome. Nothing whatever to do with what in a few moments we will rehearse again as the faith of the Church down through the ages, today in what we call the Nicene Creed:

‘We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God ... true God from true God ... of one Being with the Father ... For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit ... and became truly human.’

‘True God from true God’, ‘truly human’; the very antithesis of ‘half divine half human’! With this disastrous caricature, doubtless also the view out in the world too, the writer’s real agenda emerges: the desire to release the teaching of Jesus from what pejoratively she calls ‘the dusty coverings of Christological church dogma’.

There is more than one irony here. The chief is that it is just ‘the teaching Jesus’ who in today’s gospel is about to depart, and what a departure! But this going does not mean that he is now absent. It means, rather, his ever renewed presence through the coming of the Spirit, without which no possibility of obedience to his commandments can occur.

It is increasingly clear that that we will have to have all our wits about us as the voices within and without become increasingly shrill. Our texts, as always, chart their passage through. The truth is this. As with any human encounter, you start with the presenting truth of the person, and then a descriptive language becomes inescapable. What you don’t do is start with a language and then try to fit the person to the language. This is surely the point of the gospel today. ‘To see him and to know him’ marks his significance – the words then look after themselves. In the final analysis, gospel words are simply metaphors of significance. We either recognise Jesus or we don’t. That is to say, we are always either ‘church’ or ‘world’. If the latter, then the words will always become a battleground.

All of which puts a new spin on the outcome of the Athenian sermon:

‘When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed ...’
