

Pentecost 9
3/07/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Psalm 45

Romans 7: 15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30.

We played the flute for you and did not dance...

While we were in Spain we discovered a freedom in the use of names that is unfamiliar to us. We met Jesus, Ye-sus and I am glad to say he is a very nice chap! Nice chap or not, the Jesus we hear about in the Gospel today rebukes his audience. Through the device of a children's game, which invited people in the market place to respond either to music as if at a wedding, or to wailing as if at a funeral, he denounces the rejection and unbelief that he and John met in their work.

The two were a pair. John the mourner was the Revd Dr Gloom, stern, ascetic, fearless and seriously dedicated to his task of calling people to be ready for the coming reign of God. He had table fellowship with no one. And the flute player was the Revd Mr Party Person, the good time fellow whose sociable approach led him to break all the rules of hospitality. "*Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds*". Matthew tells us that in the hiddenness of Jesus' deeds the wisdom of God was revealed. But his conduct, and the company he kept, outraged the upright, who thought he didn't care about anything that mattered and personally attacked him.

Perhaps the infant Christian community gathered around Matthew kept this story because it was facing conflict and making slow progress in its evangelism. Perhaps remembering the poor response Jesus and John received helped them to get their bearings and gave them comfort in their trials. But Jesus, the Wisdom of God at work among us, offered them more.

The last section of the reading sounds like it has been lifted from John's Gospel. "*I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth that you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants*". It is a piece of wisdom theology that does two things. It identifies the Matthean community as the "infants", the little ones: the humble poor believers who were under pressure, struggling against the demands of the old ways they had learned from the scribal class of religious leaders. And it makes a complete identification between Jesus and God the Father. "*All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*"

The background to the Father/Son saying is an early debate about where wisdom is to be found. There were numerous contemporary answers to this question. Wisdom, envisaged as feminine power, was to be found in the Law, in the heavenly mysteries, in the Jerusalem Temple, the world or the cosmos. But as John's Gospel tells us, and is mysteriously echoed here in Matthew, Wisdom was supremely to be found in Jesus Christ: wisdom incarnate dwelling as the Son in our midst, manifesting the mercy, compassion, and love of God. To know him, is to know God.

While Jesus may not have been doing what his contemporaries expected, his actions were consistent with what the prophets had foretold about the coming reign of God. Earlier in the chapter John, who was in prison asked: “Are you the one to come or should I look for another?” Jesus replied in the Spirit of Isaiah: tell John what you see: the wilderness of the world was becoming a fruitful place, the lame and the blind were being healed, and the poor were praising God. The mystery was grace was at work in ways that were hidden. There was no great political upheaval. God was being recognised by the little ones, not the intelligent, the powerful, and the educated.

Those who are blessed are those who are not scandalised at hearing this. And to be blessed is to have been given gift: it is to have been enabled to catch a glimpse of grace at work. The poor were so blessed because their hearts were open. They did not resist, but were ready to see and know that Wisdom had come to dwell with them.

This is the basis of the much-loved promise of “rest”. The words “*Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest*” echo the Wisdom Literature in which Wisdom appears in the Market place calling out to those who are bent low under the heavy yoke of the misunderstood law. That which was meant to lead people to God had been made into an oppressive force that distracted them from the real thing.

In Matthew Jesus takes the place of Wisdom calling people in the Market Place to join him in knowing God. This knowledge is the source of the rest - the refreshing break - he offers. It is referred to as rest and an easy yoke because it has come without the burden of huge intellectual effort, or costly works of supererogation. It has come from an approach made to us from God’s side, a gift of grace present and active for us as hospitable, merciful love.

This yoke is easy, not because knowing God as revealed in Jesus Christ brings with it a lesser level of ethical demand in life, but because our response is preceded by a sense of being grasped by love and set free to thrive. To shoulder the easy yoke is to allow the music of the flute player to touch us, and enter the dance that celebrates God’s gift of life.

The graphic today is meant to connect with the reference to dancing. The picture is of Moses’ sister Miriam leading the people in a dance of liberation. The occasion was the moment when the people of God stood on the far side of the Red Sea and realized they were no longer constrained by everything their enemies had put on them. They had been delivered into new life.

Miriam’s song was not a celebration of human effort. She did not sing: “We did it”. Her song was “Sing to the Lord, for he has risen up in triumph horse and the rider he has hurled into the sea.” Her deep joy came from knowing that she and her people had been the subject of God’s gift of saving grace that lifted a burden from their shoulders. At that point the journey was far from over. If this was the easy yoke they had to carry it for a long time to come, and at times they resented the new path that had opened up for them. But it was clearly a journey into new life. To understand these things is to grasp the pattern of the way God works with us. So may it be here. Whatever it is that burdens us and holds us down, may we attend to the music of the flute-player. May we sing and dance, and have great joy in the love comes to us to lift our burdens, and call us to the dance of life.
