

Pentecost 16
21/08/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 1:8- 2:10

Psalms 124

Romans 12:1 - 8

Matthew 16:13 - 20

The King who did not know Joseph and the vocation of the church

The first of our readings today is celebrated in the commemorative sculpture that was installed outside the church as part of the 150th Anniversary of the Congregation, in 2004. Its full impact is diminished sitting next to our fenced off degraded church. It is worth remembering our aim in putting it there was to:

- speak symbolically of our life and mission in the gospel to those passing by;
- link the inner and the outer life of the congregation - its worship and mission - in concrete form;
- offer a feminine image to complement the male Reformers pictured in the rose window in the church; and
- add something of artistic beauty to the church precinct.

The Sculpture represents a public commitment to our vocation as church. Its symbolism is drawn from the rich Biblical narrative that has a long, deep history and is core material for people of faith. Does the message of the Sculpture empower us still today? What is the relationship between that message and the life of this congregation, as we live through the impact of crumbling buildings and depletion of our resources?

The key text in understanding the message of the Sculpture is the sentence: “*Now a new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph*”[Ex 1:8]. The book of Genesis ended with Joseph’s family happily settled in Egypt, a place of life-giving hospitality and blessing in a time of famine. Joseph himself declared [Gen 50:20] that God had accompanied them through serious ups and downs to preserve the life of many, not just his family but the entire population of Egypt.

The *new king did not know Joseph*. The benefits this outsider brought to Egypt were forgotten. And the new king did not know Joseph’s God, the living God who accompanies us in our life and is committed to creativity, blessing and life. Pharaoh set out to subvert the results of what God had done. With deadly force the Empire struck, turning a life-supporting environment into one that was life threatening for all of Jacob’s children who were now seen as a threat to national security. Overnight honored guests became feared strangers and an oppressive regime was instigated to render them incapable of resistance. Pharaoh wanted there to be only ONE people in the land.

For the first time the language of affliction and burden begins to enter the narrative from which we live. It builds into a memory that tells us that the living God who accompanies us in our life is one who identifies with suffering, and takes the side of the oppressed. The Psalm today is a perfect example of this memory, which even today has the power to set us free, like a bird flying from a trap.

It is impossible to understand the Sculpture, or the text, unless we know that after receiving Pharaoh's instructions: "...*the midwives feared God, they did not do as the king of Egypt said, they let the boys live.*" [Ex 1:17]. The strength to subvert the Egyptian regime came from their fear of God. Their priority was to live allowing God to be God, which meant choosing creativity, life and blessing rather than become involved in Pharaoh's death dealing ways. Because of this passive resistance the more Pharaoh pressed, the stronger Israel grew.

In the Sculpture the women are cast holding back the rock that represents Pharaoh's oppressive decrees, allowing the water of life to flow. Compared to the Egyptian death machine their power seems trivial and mundane. But God was with the women, because God works among the powerless and marginalized, as God had done through Joseph who was sold into slavery and prison.

The brutality of Pharaoh's decree is the context for the birth and preservation of the life of Moses and here a second theme begins to color the rich narrative from which we live. Women have a significant and central place in the divine economy of salvation. Feminine courage defeats Pharaoh's violence. Moses survives and the future of Jacob's family is assured. The efforts of Moses' mother and sister supplement those of the Midwives, and Pharaoh's daughter courageously disobeyed her father's decree. The power of living God is not restricted to a holy people. Divine transcendence works in unexpected places. It makes use of hearts that are open to blessing and life and five women - one of them an outsider - leave an indelible mark in the history of faith.

The first chapters of Exodus are rather like the first Chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, in which the genealogy of Jesus is sprinkled through with the unexpected presence of women. All are there because, in Gospel terms, they worked according to Kingdom power and values. Their efforts for the living God are like mustard seeds, tiny things sown in the web of life that defeat death's oppressive power and have an effect that reaches far beyond all expectations.

There is a link between these ideas and something we see in the encounter between Jesus and Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asked Peter "*Who do you say that I am?*" and Peter replied: "*you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*". Caesarea Philippi is known for two things. It is the place where divine mysteries are revealed and was the place from which the Emperor sent in the troops to crush the Jewish revolt in Jerusalem. The place of revelation and oppression is joined, as it was on Calvary.

This is the first time in Matthew that a disciple names Jesus as *the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*. Peter has recognised divine reality embodied in a life like ours and Jesus calls him "blessed". The accolade is not because he is smarter than the rest. Flesh and blood did not give him this answer. The Spirit had kindled Peter's imagination and he was able to recognize that the long expected reign of God, for which we still pray, had broken into this world to offer us a new horizon of life. Because of this Peter is named a foundational member of the church and given the keys to the Kingdom.

When we hear the words: *on this rock I will build my church*, it is a distraction to worry about whether Peter is entitled to be regarded as the first Bishop of Rome. The words that follow are what matter: *and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it*. This old language means that the power given to Peter and then made available to the church exceeds the sum total of all the power opposed to God. Unusually the idea has military connotations. Like the Roman army advancing on the gates of Jerusalem the church will advance against the gates of Hades, which will not be able to hold it back. Can we even begin to imagine how this translates into our life? What is the true value of such a belief for a congregation whose buildings are crumbling and whose assets have been depleted? Are any of the things we are worried about greater than the gates of Hell? The power of the Keys means the church has the knowledge and the power, which enables itself and others to have access to the fullness of God's grace, the realm over which death has no sway. And God has not only given the church this power, God calls the church to exercise the keys to it, and promises to stand behind and ratify what the church says and does in respect to this charter.

The defiance shown by the Midwives relates to the gift of the keys, and goes to the heart of the church's mission and ministry in the world. The Sculpture was put in place to remind ourselves, and others, that our vocation is to work for the light and life not darkness and death, and that the power of God is with us. The church is not here just to make people feel good. We have something to say that is ultimately important in life. We are for God, which means we are for creativity blessing and life, and we will not foster death, darkness, meaninglessness and despair. From Baptism to the grave we aim to do all that we can to enable others to live in the "*fear of God*" so that they will be able to grow into the fullness of being Kingdom people. We may have a cracked building and our assets may be depleted. But we have a treasure within that no one can buy or steal. Our calling is to allow that treasure to rule our lives and enable us to be part of God's life giving purposes for the world.
