

Pentecost 19
11/09/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 14:19- 31

Psalm 114

Romans 14:1 - 12

Matthew 18:21 - 35

On being formed as God's people: called to "live to the Lord"

In the country district where I grew up a special feeling of community was noticeable between those who were contemporary with my parents. I once asked a wise aunt where this came from. She said the families around us had all been pioneers. Having to face the deprivations and struggles of clearing land and starting new farms bonded the people together in a special way. This was a formative experience but it was not rehearsed or ritualised and, sadly, the sense of community it engendered faded when the next generation came along.

Formative experiences are the defining moments in our history as individuals, communities of faith, and nations. We celebrate them, as in Anzac day, or the remembrance of September Eleven, as a way of keeping alive a particular *esprit de cor*. What we choose to remember tells us who we are and what we believe about life and how life is meant to be lived.

The crossing of the Red Sea is formative for Jews and Christians. For Jews it remembers how a group of terrified refugees who were being pursued by the powers of death and were in danger of becoming extinct, emerged from the crisis to become a nation. Some say there is no evidence, as we understand it, that this happened. Others dismiss the story because of the ethical problems over the drowning of the Egyptians.

What matters is what the people who gave us this story believe it to mean.

The crossing of the Red Sea is like a creation narrative that witnesses to a gracious act in which, a people who were no people, were enabled to pass through the waters of chaos and escape the oppressive powers of death. The power that enabled this was not their own, or theirs to command. It came from God the Creator who defeated the chaos - the anti creation forces. Read the symbolism this way: the walls of water are emblematic of God's grace that protects the people by holding back the chaos. The pillar of cloud and the angel within are symbols of the presence of God that stand between Israel and its enemies, blocking Egyptians' line of sight. It was God's power that enabled the people move forward at God's command, giving Israel another chance at life.

The people emerged on the shore to joyfully celebrate the freedom that had unexpectedly been won for them. Salvation came without their aid. They sang of it then, and sing of it still. But it did involve the effort of an individual leader. And they had to have faith enough to move from where they were, despite being surrounded by dark foes, and feeling paralysed by weakness and fear.

Through this formative story the people of Israel achieved their identity. Its remembrance is a celebration of what it means "to live to the Lord" [Romans 14:8], the Creator of heaven and earth, who calls people out of darkness to live in the light of faith: faith in divine, creative, redeeming love. Even today this story is told so that those who live in it may continue to hope in God, and others may come to discover their identity as God's people, and live by faith.

The picture of the Baptismal Font is on the Order of Service today because there are links between the faith and symbolism surrounding Christian Baptism and the crossing of the Red Sea. And there are differences. Baptism is linked to Jesus Christ, who himself passed through the waters [of the Jordan] and emerged to commence his ministry as the Son of God. When Jesus resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem, to suffer and die and rise again, the Gospels see this as his *Exodus*. Jesus' life "*lived to the Lord*" involved struggling against the forces opposed to God and wrestling with suffering and death. The human response to Jesus' life *lived to the Lord* was Good Friday. God's response to Good Friday was Easter Sunday. Despite the worst we could do, God looked on us and offered us a new opportunity for life.

The risen Jesus is the sign that the relationship between ourselves and God is put right from God's side. This is sheer grace. This is what is meant by the forgiveness of sins, the basis for the sacrament of Baptism. When we pass through the water we celebrate that God has claimed us, God has said yes to us, and in the name of God, we receive our identity and calling as Christians. That is why in the Creed belief in the Spirit is associated with the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life in the Church.

The forgiveness of sins is relevant to the Gospel which challenges us to think about what it means to be a community that lives out the meaning of its Baptism as a company of forgiven debtors. It doesn't matter whether we calculate Jesus' answer to Peter's question: "...*should I forgive as many as seven times?*" [Mtt 18:21] as meaning seventy seven times or seventy times seven (= 490). The parable that follows is about how incalculable God's forgiveness is, and what it means to live in response to that gift. Being forgiven is directly related to living in forgiveness to others. As people formed by Baptism, who are committed to live life shaped by the cross and resurrection, there is meant to be a relationship between Christ's life of self-giving for us and our way of living with one another. Forgive us our debts as we forgive the debts of others is a direct expression of what it means to live life on this pattern. At every Eucharist we are given the opportunity to let our minds feed on this again as we hear the words: this is my body, broken for you/my blood shed for you. Belonging to the community of Christ means allowing these words and actions to become the moral compass for our conscience as we seek to "*live to the Lord*".

The challenge is to live like this, but it is not easy. It is not as simple as flippantly cancelling a debt by saying to everyone who offends us "I forgive you". Not everyone has a mind capable of understanding the need to offer or receive forgiveness. Restorative justice had been slowly developing careful processes to help people what they have been through and its legacy of anger, resentment and hatred. It is easy to say: "I forgive". It is much harder to achieve a true sense of peace within oneself, and real reconciliation with the offender. But the starting point is to know that as Baptised people, we have already had our debts cancelled. That gives us a new starting point to begin with, and we have a particular compass to guide us, marked with cross of Christ. A new possibility of life has been opened up.

It is hard to maintain the right choices. On the anniversary of September 11 who is there in the community of faith who does not regret that three apparently Christian leaders, George Bush, Tony Blair and John Howard, did not respond differently to the crisis. What a different place the world might be now if they had chosen a path of negotiated reconciliation, instead of demonising the attackers and embarking on a long and damaging war.

The strength to do things differently may seem beyond us; something only God could do. Occasionally Christian people who are committed to work from first principles get it right. A few years ago the Amish people of Pennsylvania, committed Christian pacifists, suffered a shocking murder of several young girls at one of their schools after which the perpetrator took his own life. Instead of seeking revenge, the Amish went out of their way to embrace the wife and family of the murderer. They offered to them the same comfort and support given to the grieving in their own community. They attended the funeral of the killer. And they took his family to funerals of some of the children he killed. They carefully established longer-term contact so that the family would not be destroyed by the tragedy their husband/father created. They offered the offender's family, who were also victims, a new opportunity of life.

Such actions seem impossible to many, and it is true that they did not have to deal with the perpetrator. But here is a living demonstration that, in the face of crushing disaster it is possible to live according to another moral compass, one that is directed by image of the Cross of Christ whose dying and living demonstrated God's love for the world. This love is mediated to every Christian in Baptism, and nourished by the bread and wine of every Eucharist. These are the gifts of God for the people of God. And in this strength we shall live.
