

Pentecost 22
2/10/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 20:1- 4, 7- 9, 12- 20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b - 14

Matthew 21:33 - 46

The first commandment

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

Exodus 20: 2 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me'.

Can we today possibly appreciate what a literally incredible revolution these words set in motion? When first uttered - and their import registered - they simply upended every contemporary certainty. Unanticipated liberation from humanly imposed bondage in Egypt was dramatic enough. But that was only a beginning. After all, everyone knew that the universe was a wild and chaotic thing. There was a god for the spring planting, another for the harvest, a god who put fish into fisherman's nets, and a god who took care of women in childbirth. In the storm, one met the god storm. Nature everywhere was dripping with divinity. Life was lived in the realm of a throbbing pulsing kingdom of the holy gods, in the interplay of gigantic forces to which life must be attuned. At best there was an uneasy truce between the gods, at worst a battle in which human beings were inextricably caught up. By the way, if with Francis Macnab you feel inclined to deride an 'old religion', then this is it in spades!

Then suddenly into this self-evident scene, a voice shouts not only that all these processes are one from a single source. But even something of far greater significance: that this single reality is to be found first of all not in the changes and chances of this fleeting world of nature, but rather as the source, the goal, and the guide of an historical destiny by which this primal source bound people to himself. *'I have brought you out of the house of slavery'*: a slavery both of natural as well as of human origin. So it was that this intangible 'meaning making' breath, this 'still small voice' which makes all things human, then and ever since, comes as a power to offer what we do not have - as rampant spirit giving significance now to this thing, this individual, this moment, and now that; comes as the motion that undoes and remakes, raiding everything that we have established and mistakenly made secure for ourselves. Wherever it sounded, that voice slew a host of horrors: malign storm demons, blighters of harvests, evil tyrants over life and death. It laid the axe to sacred trees watered by the blood of virgins, it smashed the child eating furnaces of Moloch, and in due time threw down the statues of the divinities served by Greece and Rome.

In a word, this reality is the greatest discovery ever made. Whoever that voice was, it shouted so loud that it has echoed down all time. From the minarets of the Islamic world, from the synagogues of the Jews, from the churches of Christendom, the voice is the same and the word is the same.

For Christians, however, this voice, and so this commandment, came through, and was bound to, Christ. In him it was not just a prohibition of foreign cults, but a call to arms, a declaration of war upon the gods. All the world was to be evangelised and baptised, all idols torn down, all worship to be given to the one God who in these latter days had sent his Son into the world to its salvation. It was a long and sometimes terrible conflict, often exacting a fearful price in martyrs' blood. But it was by any just estimate a victory; altars were bereft of their sacrifices, the sibyls fell silent and ultimately all the glory and cruelty of the ancient world lay inert at the feet of Christ the conqueror. Are we then surprised why it was that life for the early Church meant spiritual warfare. If Paul can be trusted this morning with his: *'Whatever gains I had, I have come to regard as trash because of Christ'*, then no baptised Christian could doubt how great a transformation of the self and the world it was to consent to serve no other god than the One whom Christ revealed.

But the sad fact is that what was yesterday's thrilling discovery of the One God has become today's tame commonplace. When we have heard good news too often we become incapable of hearing it at all. Why shout it again? Except in the dark underworld where astrologists and numerologists and magicians dwell, nobody really believes in many gods any more. The Christian call to arms still sounds of course. But it is clear that by comparison with the burden that the first commandment lays on us today, the defeat of the ancient pantheon and the elemental spirits and the lurking demons will prove to have been comparatively easy. For the reality is that today the issue is not the One against the many, but the One against the none.

Where the old pagans had to choose between a brilliant jangling chaotic universe alive with lawless powers, between this world and the serene and ordered universe of the One God and his law, modern pagans have to choose between this divine order and the frantic irresponsible chaotic universe of no god at all. Lest you think that for once I exaggerate, the latest polls estimate that now 52% of Australians aged between 25 and 39 declare themselves to be atheist. Whatever the reliability of that statistic, the corollary is that on every hand it is abundantly clear that they, and by association we too, are now required to live in an age where no value is higher than the right to choose, if not always the power. Choice is everything. Choice will propose, seize, accept or reject, want or not want, finding its divinities as someone has nicely put it *'not in glades or grottos but in gift shops'*. Choice encompasses the whole range, from the innocuous liberty of buying purple bedsheets to destroying one's unborn child or to exiting this world at one's own disposition.

But what choice can't do, of course, is obey. Indeed, society must be secured against the intrusions of any Other by whatever name, certainly not religion - not that that really matters so much - but what is much more decisive, by pre-empting even the possibility of any effective comprehension of God, except now and then as a hypothetical embroidery on the reality of life.

Increasingly not even that. A few weeks ago, the theme of a TV Insight programme was Revenge. The whole hour passed with not the slightest recognition that a religious tradition might have something to offer on that score. Or look how cleverly religion has been syphoned off to the realm of the private while politics goes on from strength to strength, if that's the right descriptor of the contemporary scene. Not to speak of the mantra of the separation of Church and State into their hermetically sealed containers, conveniently forgetting that the original brief of that distinction was to protect Churches from intrusions by the State, not the other way round.

At least at the beginning the gods were real, giving the gospel enemies with which to come to grip. But how to wage war on nothingness? It is surely much easier to convince a world that it is in thrall to demons, and there to offer redemption, than it is to convince a society that it is a slave to itself, and a prisoner of so many competitive wills serving the god called 'choice'. Here is a god more elusive and primal and indomitable than any Apollo or Dionysus. But it is surely this god against whom this first commandment now calls us to struggle.

But there is yet something in all this much more compelling than a preacher, as always, railing against the modern world. And it is this which we ignore at our peril. Armed with this commandment, Jew and Christian together have in large part been responsible for this contemporary banality. If, as is the case, the gospel shook the ancient world to its foundations, tearing down the heavens as it did, so it helped to bring us to the impending ruins of the present moment.

I recall as if yesterday, though it is now almost 50 years ago, long before we were really aware of much of what is happening, the startling remark of a revered teacher to an impressionable class of young theological students:

'The gospel has been heard, and therefore the Churches are empty.' Empty, not as we might expect, filled or filling. And this was in the United States, of all places, before the celebrated revolutions of the sixties and seventies!

What he meant, of course, was that Christian faith was complicit in the death of antiquity and the birth of modernity because it alone shattered the imposing façade behind which the power of the nothing was always hiding. And so inadvertently, Christian faith revealed this nothing for what it really is. And so here we are today – the gods are silent, hear the silence of the gods!

Our time has gone. What then is to be done? Or better, what does this first and great commandment require of us?

Just two suggestions. First, to have no other god requires us to a sober recognition of what is before us. It clearly is, and will be, a painful project, but then Christians above all owe their very life to the pain of God. Our bearing of a corresponding pain requires recognition that neither we nor our grandchildren will live to see a new Christian culture in the Western world, and this has to be accepted as our witness to the providence of the God of the gospel. Faith will accept this as the work of the Holy Spirit in our time so that our natural disappointment, even resentment, might in principle be done away with at the outset.

Second, we are summoned to a much more disciplined life than the Churches in our lifetime have known. This congregation is well placed for such a future. Most of us know why we have sought to identify with what takes place here. Here we are increasingly stripped to the bare essentials. We can be grateful that our worship week by week knows the one thing needful: Word, sacrament, and the pastoral care precipitated by both, are always before us. Then, too, the Creeds we rehearse each week that to the uninitiated are dismissed as either quaint relic or with outright hostility are in the final analysis nothing more than an elucidation of this first and great commandment. Contrary to all paternalistic detractors, the creeds will prove to be the battle hymn of the future:

‘I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of that heaven and earth from which the gods have been exorcised’;

‘I believe in Jesus Christ, by grace the only Son of the Father, and *the Lord* of that freedom conferred by this commandment;

‘I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of *Life*’. Not we need to tell all who will hear, the giver of ‘religion’.

Where this confession is properly understood, what Christian congregation needs more for the coming days? The only choice is to serve him whom Christ has revealed, or to serve nothing.

‘I am the Lord your God...who brought you out of the land of slavery’ – all things have been made subject to him, all has been put beneath his feet until the very end of the world.

There is, in truth, no other God.
