

**Pentecost 25**  
**23/10/2011**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Deuteronomy 34:1-12**

**Psalm 90**

**1 Thessalonians 2:1-8**

**Matthew 22:34-46**

**Moses is dead!**

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A few weeks ago the media celebrated the life of Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple, whose genius brought so much creativity and innovation to the world of communication. Will there ever be another like him?

In the past few days we have witnessed the humiliating horror of Moammer Ghaddaffi's death. The only dignity afforded him is that he proved to be no coward who left his supporters to suffer without him. Here died a man whom we would wish had been moved by a different vision and lived according to different rules, but it did not stop other world leaders from playing a duplicitous game around him for whatever advantage it would bring.

Today we heard the poignant story of Moses' death. He was a superlative leader whose judgement and vigour had not waned despite his age. He lived by a vision that was not something he dreamed up for his own enrichment or edification. It was a gift of God for the life of the people, for whom he suffered and struggled as he sought to enable them to live according to its promises.

We heard that Moses died "at the Lord's command" and "no-one knows his burial place". From the burning bush to his burial in Moab, everything that happened to Moses happened because of the call of God. The hiddenness of his burial place marks him out with the prophet Elijah [2 Kings 2:1 – 12] - and with Jesus himself. It is no accident that the Gospel has all three appear together on the Mount of Transfiguration, in anticipation of Jesus' own death.

According to the book of Numbers, Moses led the people quickly to the edge of the Promised Land. Spies were sent in to investigate and the reports of the country and the strength of the inhabitants aroused fear in the hearts of the people and they stalled. God's anger rose against them for choosing to live in fear, so that they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. One writer said Moses' task during those years was to raise up a generation of people who were free of the mentality of slavery [Ellis C Nelson]. This he did, at great cost to himself. By the time we come to this stage, Moses is one of only three who remain from the original generation that left Egypt.

The people were ready. Moses was called to stand on the mountain above the plains of Moab from which point *the Lord showed him the whole land*, ...which he would not enter. The scene, spelt out in careful detail, is far more than a geography lesson. We know this because it is impossible to see all that Moses is said to have seen. This is a vision that occurs in time, and relates to the world we know, yet comes from beyond time. It is a vision of the fulfilment of the promises of God. What these verses portray can be equated with the vision of the new heaven and the new earth given in the book of Revelation, as seen by John the beloved disciple, when he was lifted up on Eagles wings to see what God sees.

Some people say that “seeing the whole of the land” amounts to a legal act of possession [von Rad]. What this means is that even though the sins of the people meant Moses was prevented from entering the land, he has been allowed to glimpse the widest dimensions of God’s grace. In that sense he is already in possession of the promises of God. He has been able to glimpse the complete picture of God’s will for the world.

Chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews celebrates Moses among the many who:

*died in faith, without having received the promises; but from a distance they saw and greeted them from afar... therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, indeed he has prepared a city for them. Heb. 11:13a -16*

Outside Scripture the church has continued to celebrate those gifted with faithful vision. Gregory the Great tells how soon after the death of his sister, St Benedict was standing at his window late at night when “he suddenly saw a flood of light more brilliant than the sun”. A vision followed in which “the whole world was gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light” [Dialogues, Book 2 Ch. 35]. In 1980, when the 1500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Benedict was remembered, Melbourne University held a special symposium to celebrate his gift to the world. The Symposium was led by the Departments of French, German and Italian in co-operation with other University committees, and included contributions from many parts of Australia. We can hardly imagine such an event. It would have been impossible for Benedict to have foreseen a world so vast. Nor is it likely he imagined his ideas for prayer and community life would have reached to its furthest bounds.

The night before he died Martin Luther King Jnr said: *I am not afraid to die. I have been up on to the mountain, I have seen the promised land...* We remember his speech, *I have a dream...* in which he spelt out his vision for the future of humanity. His death, as does the death of Moses, highlights the painful nexus mortals have struggled with from paradise to the present; the conflict between the human ability to be captured by a lofty vision, and the painful reality of having to live with the “not yet” - the limitations of human attainment. Faithfulness and wisdom calls us to accept our limitations and remain humble in the deepest sense of that word as we live out the vision of the kingdom.

*Where there is no vision the people perish.* We know from stories of hardship and deprivation that people who have hope and vision are able to sustain themselves and strongly resist evil and hopelessness. Where there is no vision, or where a vision is forgotten, people are easily side-tracked and risk losing their way. People and communities need a vision, but what sort of vision? Where does it come from? Who is the vision for? Vision can be creative or destructive: beautiful or insane.

For the church, vision comes from a deep belief in God who is for us, and what that means for our life in the world. At best a vision for a church fits with a vision for the world, for both are interested in stimulating human activity to move towards goals that are humane and life giving. That is what the Basis of Union points to when it speaks of us moving “forward together towards the promised goal”. The difference between what a church may envision and what might take root in the culture will be over what the best ingredients are for a life that is truly human. A vision for a church will be something that while it has a transcendent quality, integrates all aspects of human life. The life of the Spirit of God moulds who we are, and who we are must

reflect that work in the world. This is another way of talking about how the greatest commandment, and the second that follows it fit together to play their part in the long haul of history. There is meant to be no separation between the material and the spiritual. If we were to put this into the language of John's Gospel we would say: this is what it means for the Word to become flesh. It is noticeable that in John, all Jesus' signs and wonders, like the Sacraments, have material effect, they feed us, heal us and form us – and shape us into Christ.

There is no doubt the Church is called to be a visionary community. It is led by a view of life that is humble, hopeful and positive. Nothing could be more necessary in the world today. But the church also knows what it means to see the whole land and not be able to go there. However, this does not mean it looks on the world with cultural pessimism. The vision we stand for is born of a gift of God. We will not be destroyed and dismayed by what the world thinks of us, but will always be able to remember, that what we have been given was a gift, not born of our imagination. And yet this gift does depend on our love and commitment to see it through, whether or not we get to the end of the road in this life, or the next.

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