

The Reign of Christ
20/11/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalm 100

Matthew 25:31-46

Sermon preached by Rev. Peter Blackwood

In recent weeks I have attended the funerals of two of my teachers (as have a number of you). I have been remembering how they formed me for ministry in the church. Graeme Griffin formed me into a pastor. Nigel Watson formed me for preaching. No one formed me for doing administration, so I keep wondering how come I have been set up to do so much of that now.

When Nigel Watson returned from sabbatical in Europe shortly before the formation of the Uniting Church he had much to say about what he had learned about preaching from Willie Marxsen in Münster. Nigel brought home with him a formula for helping the spark to jump from the pages of Scripture to the pulpit, to make sense of a word from God to an ancient people and an unfamiliar context into our place and times. This method placed emphasis on historical criticism, looking what was going on in the society of the person who was writing the stories, the critical comments, the advice, the social comment. Why was this writing being written in that time and place? I have remembered what Nigel taught as I have read the Jewish prophet, Ezekiel and the Christian evangelist, Matthew.

Ezekiel was writing nearly 600 years before the time of Jesus. The text we have heard this morning addresses the time when huge proportions of the population of Jerusalem in Judah had been conquered and deported to Babylon. The prophet had written about national and international affairs in connection with the plight of his people. By the time he gets to chapter 34 it was looking like the troubles were ending and return to Jerusalem could happen.

Matthew was writing more than 70 years after the time of Jesus. This helps make sense of some of why he wrote what he did. It is likely that Matthew's church was Jewish Christian but had long been expelled from fellowship with the synagogue. Also Jerusalem had been sacked by the Romans and Matthew's church was in Syria.

I am struck by the similarities that belong to these texts.

Ezekiel's community was separated from Jerusalem, from the worship of the temple. They were scattered among the people of other nations. Matthew's church was separated from Jerusalem. The temple was destroyed. They were excluded from the synagogue. The church spoke of itself as the little ones or the least – vulnerable and exposed to the behaviour of others. In each text the shepherd figure will bring his sheep to a safe haven, to their own land, to the inheritance of the kingdom.

The prophet and the evangelist announce an end to times of trouble, at least for some – for it is also a time of reckoning – here is judgement. These are a two edged messages – messages to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. In Ezekiel God declares:

Ezekiel 34:20-22 *I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²² I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged;*

Matthew's vision has that intriguing element of surprise. **Matthew 25:44** *Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'*

Why the surprise? How come the Christians in the vision couldn't recognize the king in the least? Because in the vision the Son of Man will come and gather all the nations before him. This is not the church gathered before Christ. This is all humanity most of whom would not know Christ if he stood up their porridge. In the vision all the nations are gathered, but the story of the vision is not told to all the nations in the first instance. It is told to the followers of Jesus who referred to themselves as the least.

In this context the little band is invited to think of those outside their little band not as beyond Christ's commendation on the basis of their status as non-church, but included on the basis of their behavior towards the least. This is consistent with Matthew's insistence that belonging cannot be claimed on their status as children of Abraham. God's favour, found in Christ, calls on his followers to imitate Christ who identified with the least. Surely this expectation cannot be less than what is exhibited and commended by those outside the community of faith.

I have remembered what Nigel Watson taught as I have read Ezekiel and Matthew this week. Having pondered the circumstances in which the writers addressed their messages. Nigel called on preachers to examine their own circumstance to see if there is a parallel context. If there is, then the word of God to the ancient people of the Bible may then become the word of God to us.

Ezekiel 34:17-19 ¹⁷ *As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: ¹⁸ Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? ¹⁹ And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?'*

It seems Ezekiel's world, like ours, could point to those rulers and owners and nations and economic systems that despoil and plunder and lay waste. He would recognize polluting industries, rapacious financial institutions, the pursuit of self-interest at the expense of the needs of others. *thus says the Lord GOD: ... ¹⁸ must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?*

While Ezekiel would recognize our big players in the greed and self-interest corner of the pasture, Matthew would recognize little ones of the world for whom the kindness of everyday fellow travelers can make the difference. He would be familiar with the poor, the sick, the bereaved, racial groups treated as strangers in an alien land or in their own land.

Listen as God speaks through Ezekiel: thus says the Lord God: Why do you take more than you need? Your waste is an affront to those whose needs are not met. I will save them from you.

Listen as God speaks to the church through Matthew: Christ is found, encountered and served in surprising places. Yes, in this place on this day we can expect to know the presence of God through the book on the lectern, through the water in the font as Alexander is baptised, through the bread and wine from the table as we share in the Eucharist. It is not surprising that God is found in religious ritual, but do not be surprised to find that you have encountered Christ found in every person in need. Is this encounter less holy? By no means. In a communion hymn by Fred Green is the line 'for service, too, is sacrament'.

ⁱ *Scripture quotations are from the NRSV*