

Pentecost 18
30/9/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22

Psalm 124

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

...whose deeds of power?...

The book of Esther does not mention God at all. It honours the deeds of a Jewish woman who became queen of Persia and thwarted a plan that would have exterminated the minority Jewish population in that land. The people survived and a festival was created. In biblical terms, demonic power is present wherever people are inspired to engage in negative or evil deeds that result in communities being robbed of wholeness and life. In this sense demonic power is the will to power over against God. When the Bible speaks of the casting out of demons it signifies that a more powerful force of healing and wellbeing is at work in the world, thwarting the progress of evil and bringing forth good things where none was expected.

Mark's gospel is full of stories of Jesus teaching and acting in ways that are liberating and renewing. He is the great conqueror of demons, ridding the earth of them through healings and exorcisms. People are amazed at his power. To modern eyes the credibility of these stories is doubtful because they seem to involve the breaking of the laws of nature. But for people in the ancient world there were no laws of nature to break. These stories proclaim that the power at work in Jesus was a sign that the renewing power of the Kingdom – God's power of life - was breaking into the world through him. For us the demons translate as the powers of darkness that disrupt and destroy our best endeavours. They are the will to tyrannical power, the addictive and obsessive commitment to what is negative and destructive, or unfettered self-interest that cares nothing for the earth or its people. Powers such as these confine and crush us individually and collectively, causing us to lose hope and court despair.

Today's reading opens with John's report that an outsider had been discovered casting out demons in Jesus' name. John may have been embarrassed. In the previous chapter the disciples had been unable to help a man whose son was seriously afflicted by a demonic power. It is more likely John was troubled because there was competition. Someone was using the Jesus brand without permission. John told Jesus: *we tried to stop him because he was not following us.*

Jesus' response removed any chance the disciples could claim exclusive rights to the power at work in him: *Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon after to speak ill of me* [v 39]. The disciples have no monopoly on redemptive acts conducted "in the name of Jesus". The Spirit at work in him is not confined to the community of the twelve. That means it is also not limited to the boundaries of the church either. But what does it mean to do things *in the name of Jesus*?

In the ancient world a name does not simply designate one person or being from another. It is closely related to the nature of its bearer, especially in the case of divinities, or figures of power. When Jesus is praying in John 17:6 he says: *I have made my name known to those you gave me from the world*, which implies he has revealed God's nature and will; that he is vessel chosen to embody and reveal God's nature in the world. Therefore to do things "in the name of Jesus" is to do them in keeping with the nature and will of God revealed in his ministry, his life and his death. It is to face the mystery of the Cross and act in line with gracious, inclusive, redeeming love that is prepared to suffer for the other.

"In his name" means that the mark of the cross stands over all acts of mercy or redemption that involve self-giving for the liberation of others. This is true whether they are conducted by members of the church or by "anonymous Christians". That is why there is no shame if Fred Hollows and Mahatma Ghandi stand alongside Jesus, because their deeds "for the least" were not done for selfish gain and grandeur. They were done in a spirit of sacrifice and self giving.

Secondly: Jesus said: *those who are not against us are for us* [v 40]. Matthew and Luke have Jesus say: *whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters* [12:30]. Matthew and Luke call for undivided loyalty, but Mark is concerned to have the twelve focus on the nature of the deed being done, rather than the question of who has a monopoly on Jesus' power. What is at stake in Mark is whether the followers of Jesus are truly open to work of the Spirit and are able to let God be God.

Jesus said: *those who are not against us are for us* [v 40]. The *for us* in the text is the sign that there is an expectation that the mission of God is continuing, in us as well as beyond us. The *for us* is a call to the people of God to hold fast to the power revealed in the cross and, in the name of Christ, continue to live lives of holiness and justice, bringing their particular insights to all situations of life in the world.

When we think about what Mark says, and the fact that this reading is linked with Esther's apparently secular deed of power, it causes us to ask: if God works out there without our aid, how are we to respond? Should we call for the disbanding of Uniting Care because there is nothing left for the people of God to do? In reality the negative and evil forces that affect us individually and collectively still struggle for supremacy in the world. There is still a need for those who know the power of God to proclaim it, and express what they mean in acts of redemption that liberate, restore and renew.

Thirdly Jesus said: *Truly I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of cold water to drink, because you bear the name of Christ, will not lose the reward* [v 41]. So far the dialogue has been concerned with what is going on outside the community of faith. Here it focuses solemnly on what is done to the community of faith. Whoever acts kindly towards the Christian community will be rewarded in the greater scheme of God's purposes. It will be like those who in Matthew 25:37-45 found themselves accepted because they unconsciously cared for the poor and the least – which includes the disciples of Christ - while those who thought they had been righteous, failed.

At this point a challenging tone and imagery occurs in the text. Having so far affirmed the good that is outside the community of faith, the focus turns to how evil may be experienced inside the community and has to be cut out. The “little ones” may be children, or they may be new believers who must be protected from danger. The parts of the body recommended for amputation refer to the members of the community of faith who are to be disciplined. The drastic measures are not to be carried out in a literal sense, but the dis-ease that has crept in has to be acknowledged, cleansed and cauterised to keep the community strong. These prophetic words are part of the apocalyptic worldview that was Mark’s frame of reference. His experience of disaster, in the Cross and the in the destruction of Jerusalem was shattering. But he showed that life won through.

This week Jennifer Byrne of the ABC interviewed JK Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books. Rowling was very frank about her life. She told how for a long period of time she lived on a level one rung above extreme poverty. It was like facing a purifying fire, and it drove her to strict self-discipline to keep her life together. She wrote, and she survived. But she said that the purifying fire made her resolve never to squander the chance she had been given, or to forget the people she knew in those days. In an address to graduate students at Harvard, she said words they would have found very hard to hear: *don’t be afraid of failure. It may be necessary in order for you to succeed in life.*

The last words in our text are about salt and fire. They are difficult, but they affirm the supreme value of the Kingdom [*A Costly Freedom*, B Byrne 155], and the possibility of surviving disruption and persecution. What is at stake is facing the reality of evil, the possibility of disaster and loss, and focussing on the supreme value of life under God. Mark’s message to us is: if you are willing to live this life, you will be salted: purified and kept from corruption. You will know the peace and freedom that is God’s gift.
