

Easter 2
7/4/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 4:27-32
Psalm 150
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

It must have been tough for those first disciples, having only a vacant tomb and the bizarre stories of a few women inviting them to radically rethink their assumptions about what had just happened that first Easter.

Their hero was dead.

Their hopes were dashed.

Their way of life was in disarray.

They were marked men, politically *and* religiously.

Had they just made complete fools of themselves, giving up everything to devote themselves to the man who seemed to have all the answers? After all, look where those answers got *him*!

No-one could deny that it was a scary place to be in, with their leader executed and weird things happening.

How do you get your head around such a turn of events?

How do you respond when everything you know is suddenly turned on its head?

Meeting with others in the same boat is a good start. Sharing memories. Sharing pain. Sharing tears. Sharing fear. Sharing disappointment. Sharing bewilderment. Sharing more memories. Is this not how we all go about our grieving, whatever our loss?

In time they begin perhaps to dare to look beyond the immediate moment. They draw remembered threads together, seeing things with the wisdom of hindsight. They recognise slowly some sense of completeness in the life so brutally and prematurely ended. Somehow they would get through. Somehow it would be all right. Never the same, but possible. Somehow it would come to make sense even as it continued to scream its utter senselessness. Trust God. What else can you do? Trust the creator to do *something* creative with the shattered remains of this precious life, this adventure, this unrealised potential.

We don't know what happened for those disciples, that led them to tell the story of their experience as they did. We don't know how the story ended up in the form we have it in John's Gospel. We don't need to know. This is faith, not science. Faith is a valid way of knowing, that uses words to paint pictures of experiences and insights beyond description, pictures that challenge and tease and delight us, pictures that invite us to risk entering imaginatively into the same space, to discover and rediscover our God and ourselves in relationship, in love, alive!

When Jesus appears to the disciples, and to us, we suddenly see. The penny drops. We get it. Inexplicably we recognise a new way of apprehending the battered broken body – not all fixed up, but not annihilated either – the damage a painful yet strangely exhilarating reminder of the cost, the incredible price paid to take us to this new place of understanding, to show us how the utter futility gives way to insights that defy logic and make everything make sense in a whole new framework. And we are overwhelmed with wonder, and the joy born of knowing ourselves to be so utterly loved.

“Peace be with you!” says this Jesus who miraculously shows himself to us.

Peace beyond understanding.

Peace beyond all reason.

Peace that calms the utmost fear.

“Peace be with you!” Again.

Peace that calms the joyous excitement of new discovery.

Peace: that inner stillness, that knows what must be done. Fear and fervour are equally unhelpful for what lies ahead. The task can only be undertaken out of Christ’s peace, not our fluttering emotions.

“As the Father sent me so I send you.”

Peace, that knows there will come the strength and skill and will to do it.

“Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Memories of the breath of God entering, enlivening, the earthen earthman, Adam. We are re-enlivened, born again, re-created, drawn into eternal life, made new.

Peace. The peace of Christ. The gift that takes us out of this world! The gift we are sent to give to the world.

Then comes the next astonishing thing. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” That is how the writer of John describes the task that is the vocation of the community of believers, jointly and severally.

Can it really be that we are entrusted with such an awesome responsibility? Are we being set up as judge and jury to determine who is worthy of forgiveness? Does the Christian church have the final word on who’s in and who’s out of God’s new creation? I hope not. Wasn’t Jesus’ main criticism of the religious institution of his day that they presumed to exclude people from the community, using the law to judge rather than include?

It seems to me, then, that this is not an invitation to choose one way or the other. It is not an excuse to sit around in committees deciding who will or won’t receive God’s forgiveness. Quite the opposite. The onus on us to exercise God’s forgiveness is so significant that, should we fail to do that, we will incur lasting damage on any from whom we withhold that forgiveness. If we deny someone God’s forgiveness, we deny the gospel, and hence fail to witness to the resurrection and the promise of forgiveness it declares.

Our task of giving or withholding God’s forgiveness, then, is played out in the ordinariness of our day to day lives as we seek to follow Jesus’ way of being with people. Essentially, forgiveness is about being in relationship, not allowing another’s way of being to be a barrier to relationship. Forgiveness is not pronounced, but lived. Forgiveness is inclusion. Exclusion is not an option.

Jesus lived God's forgiveness when he ate with tax collectors and sinners, party-ed with Pharisees, welcomed outcasts, had bread and fish picnics with hundreds and laid hands on the supposedly unclean, which is just another way of saying the unforgiven. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Forgiveness is surprising, offensive to the self-satisfied, and radically costly. We live God's forgiveness when we hang about with down and outs and corporate bosses, refugees and terrorists, ministers and atheists, soccer players and bikies, politicians and those who live with mental illness. When we distance ourselves from any individual or group in order to protect ourselves, we're living out of our emotions rather than Christ's peace, and in so doing we are withholding God's forgiveness. When we are surprising, offensive to those who judge us, and paying a price to engage with the unacceptable, we are living the forgiveness of God and witnessing to a way of life won for us in the most costly way imaginable.

It can be tough for us, having only a few bizarre stories in an ancient book inviting us to radically rethink our assumptions about what happened that first Easter. But we have gathered here together, daring to step into that ancient world and see for ourselves that Christ is risen. The living Lord enfolds us in his peace and the Holy Spirit inspires us to live the forgiveness of God, to God's praise and glory. How lucky are we.
