

Pentecost 8
14/7/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Colossians 1:24-2:12

Psalm 8

Luke 10:10-37

(Off RCL)

Today, Paul on the “mystery” of the Christian religion.

Our English word “mystery” springs directly from the Greek word *mysterion*, and we heard it three times in our reading this morning. But our familiarity with the word doesn’t mean that we will hear what *Paul* means when he uses it. For the most part, the word “mystery” is likely to mean for us a problem which has not yet been solved but which we might expect could be, if we only had enough information. To tease out the difference between a problem and a mystery, and to see what *kind* of thing it is Paul refers to when he speaks of a mystery, I want to draw out the difference between jet aeroplanes and the polity of Australian Labor Party.

Most of you probably noticed that earlier this week a Boeing 777 crashed landed in San Francisco. Keeping things which are heavier than air in the air is what we might call an exact science. The combination of speed, wing shape, weight distribution and many other things have to be kept in a very careful balance if the plane is to rise and fall according to plan. When something goes wrong an extensive investigation is launched in order to pinpoint the problem and correct it. If need be, the plane can be stripped back to its component parts, and each one checked to see where the problem lay. Every such identified failure is then cross-checked with other planes of the same kind to make sure it doesn’t happen again, and every found problem in design or maintenance contributes to the ever-increasing safety of air travel. When it comes to aeroplanes falling out of the air before they are supposed to, we rightly speak of a “problem”, by which we mean something which must *and can* be fixed.

Another thing which happened earlier this week was that the new-old Prime Minister proposed a series of rule changes within the Labor Party which would alter the way in which a leader was elected and would lock that leader in for the period of the corresponding parliament. This has been read by many as an attempt to address what this Prime Minister, at least, sees as a problem in the system: the way in which he was unceremoniously dumped, if not the way in which Julia Gillard was also

dealt with. The difficulty here, as many have also observed, is that his proposed changes will not – and cannot – work. While he has proposed a safety switch in the process, so that a leader who brings the party into “disrepute” may indeed be removed before the previously appointed time, it is the very imprecise interpretation of what “disrepute” means which will be the clincher. Presumably a party sliding catastrophically in the polls has been brought into disrepute – precisely the conditions which saw the current PM ousted and then reinstated under the old rules. Who will determine when some such disrepute is enough?

While keeping aeroplanes in the air is a very precise science, keeping leaders of parliamentary parties in office is not. The fundamental difficulty with what the PM has proposed is that he seems to think that keeping a leader in office is a challenge comparable to keeping an aeroplane in the air – you just have to get the rules right. That is, he seems to imagine that he is dealing with a simple problem when, in fact, he

is dealing with what Paul would call a mystery – the mystery which is human politics. This is an impenetrable thing, simply given, like an unalterable feature of the landscape.

Globally, last year was the safest year ever for air travel, eclipsing 2011 as the previous best year in terms of accidents per number of flights.¹ And we can only expect that this will continue to improve. The problem of keeping planes in the air is a complex problem but *only* a problem, in that it the physics is reliable and we simply have to perfect the techniques in relation to the physics.

Political party leaders can look forward to no such improving safety record, regardless of who can vote for the party leader or what provisos and caveats are placed on his or her appointment. What has happened in Australian Federal, State and Local politics over the last few years is the same kind of thing which would have happened in Greece in 500BC, or in any other place and at other time. A week is a long time in politics because human relationships cannot be reduced to fundamental laws which can be exploited through reliable technique, such that we can know with confidence what is going to happen next.

It is this irreducibility, this resistance to being stripped down to component parts, which Paul means when he speaks of “mystery”. It is not a solvable *problem* but simply a given – a thing posited, to be taken up or perhaps ignored, set in our midst.

Now, of course, our real interest this morning is neither the mysteries of political shenanigans nor the problems of keeping heavy objects in the air. Rather, we are concerned with the mystery – the given thing – at the heart of our confession. Strangely, given how we usually use the word “mystery”, all this also means that we are not dealing here with a hidden thing but with a thing *revealed*: The mystery of faith *was* hidden “throughout the ages and generations” but now is “revealed to his saints” (1.26). And yet it *remains* a mystery. That is, a mystery is not something unknown – a problem to be investigated and solved – but something known.

The specific mystery with which Paul is concerned is not politics, of course, although it is not unconnected. In particular, the mystery once hidden and now revealed is “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (1.27) or, a little later, “Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2.2). These are very dense little declarations in themselves, and we are not going to be able to tease them out fully here. Let it be enough here to say that Paul’s basic point is the *givenness* of Christ. Here is something which is its own reality – to be taken or left – but a real and viable proposal about what is at the heart of what we are.

Now, to recall something I said last week: while I am sure that all I have said so far about mystery, and about Christ as mystery, has been right, it is not yet very interesting, very engaging. As I will unfold in more detail next week, all scripture is polemical. For the Paul in his engagement with the Colossians, the polemic is precisely about what a mystery is, and which mysteries matter. The Colossians were being tempted by one variety of a religious movement known collectively as “the mystery religions”, one of the many forms of Gnosticism washing through the Empire in the centuries before and after Christ. Like most religious movements, these ones have the driving question: what must I do, or know, to inherit eternal life (to borrow a line from our Gospel reading today [Luke 10.25])? Scholars cannot agree on the

¹ <http://www.ibtimes.com/air-travel-safety-has-never-been-higher-despite-concerns-about-boeing-dreamliner-batteries-1078234>

details of this particular religious influence on the Colossians, but some clues can be gleaned from the things to which Paul says “No”. These groups would emphasise the importance of observing certain festivals, certain astrological events, the eating of certain things, the avoidance of eating or touching other things (cf. 2.8,16,21-23). These “mysteries” (so-called) are not what Paul means when he uses the term, but are facts or incantations or observances on a “list” of things one must do in order to ascend through the higher heavenly orders. Paul happily borrows the word “mystery”, but uses it in an entirely different way. Yes, the mystery was once hidden, as are the mysteries of the Gnostics hidden from the initiated. Yes, the mystery is now revealed, as can be the Gnostic mysteries through initiation. But what is revealed in Christ is not a new law, a new set of things you have to do or know. What is revealed in Christ is just Christ himself, who is Christ *for us*: “Christ in you, the hope of glory”, Christ within us, comprehending of us.

We will hear more about this also in the weeks to come. But for now, the interesting bit, the polemical bit, that we might hear Paul not only for the Colossians but for us: What are our mysteries, in the weak, Gnostic sense – our “must do’s”, our “mustn’t do’s”, so far as religious observance goes? Everything we value as church runs the risk of becoming just such a poor “mystery”, a poor fact, a mere incantation, something done because we “should”: the saying of a creed, the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, the reading of a lectionary, the “quality” of the music, clerical vestments, who can and cannot speak, the aesthetics of the space in which we gather. Or consider: do we really have to celebrate Easter Day, given that *today* is the also “the Lord’s Day”. Or Christmas? What exactly is the purpose of Lent and Advent, given we are called to discipleship at all times, and must wait on the advent of God at all times? It is very easy for these cherished things to come to be treated as mysteries in the Gnostic sense: the stuff you have to do if “it” is to be “right,” by which we probably secretly, deep down, mean: which we must do if God is to be suitably impressed and the door to heaven is to be opened just a little wider. This is a very Gnostic, mystery-religions way of thinking.

None of this is to suggest that any particular thing we do ought to stop; we have to do *something*, whether as church or in our public lives in the world. But we might just hold them a little more lightly. For Paul reminds the Colossians and us that the door to heaven – wherever and whenever heaven might be – is *already* swung wide. The “mysteries” of Christian liturgy and living are not door stops but arrows showing the way for those who do not yet know, and those who have perhaps forgotten: “you *have come* to fullness in him”, have been buried with him in baptism, were raised with him through faith (2.10-12).

This is the mystery of Christian faith – that the thing we are to know already knows us, welcomes us, embraces us, comprehends us. This being the case, other problems and mysteries do not cease to exist but diminish in importance, for *all things* in heaven and earth will be comprehended by Christ in this way, and so reconciled to God, set in right order (1.15-20). How this can be so is not a problem to solve but a mystery to give rise to wonder.

For this gift, and promise, all thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and always. Amen.
