

Easter 3
4/5/2014

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Psalm 116

Luke 24:13-35

“What must we do?”

Looking around at the church today – our own congregation and the wider church – we can't help but wonder what future the church has. In pondering that future, we are tempted to ask, for the sake of the church: “What must we do?” What must we do to stem the decline in numbers, to get more people involved to take up the jobs which need to be done – that sort of thing? Something like this question surely informs the “Major Strategic Review” in the midst of which our UCA Synod now finds itself.

One answer to the “What must we do?” question, with a small but committed group of adherents, is to declare that we are to do nothing much at all, for indeed it is *God's* work to secure the future of the church. Any future for the church in which it *remains* the “one, holy catholic and apostolic” church and doesn't become something else, must necessarily be something which God creates and sustains. This approach tends to claim the ground of “orthodoxy”, declaring confidence in God alone and being largely suspicious of anything which smacks of trying to help God along with his work in the world. On one level, the truth here cannot be denied: not works but faith, not an *earned* future but a gracefully *given* one is where the life of God's people is truly to be found. But, at another level, this type of response to our situation is too often blind to the number of decisions and actions we have already taken on God's behalf. It effectively declares that we have already chosen as well as we can and then waits upon God and the rest of the world to move. Not acting, not deciding, remains a decision for some action already taken.

The more favoured “what-we-must-do” answer is more or less to change what is believed or done by faith communities, on the conviction that what has been traditionally observed is not helpful or is even untenable in this day. In its more extreme versions this is where we'd usually find the so-called “liberal” and “progressive” Christians, but it has its more moderate advocates as well. The present is a place “radically” different from the past, and so the church must undergo similarly radical change. Linked to this approach is the temptation to establish the worth of the church to the wider society by tending to society's own perception of what it needs. In this way the church justifies, at least to itself, its own existence.

“What must we do?” is a question also asked in our reading from Acts this morning, although at first appearance with a different motivation and a different type of response than would seem appropriate in relation to *our* “what-to-do?” question. And yet, despite this apparent difference, looking to what is happening in the reading opens up different possibilities for understanding our own situation and possible responses to it.

In response to Peter’s uncompromising preaching of the culpability of “the house of Israel” in the death of Jesus, and God’s having raised this Jesus as Lord and Messiah, the crowd responds, “Brothers, what must we do?” Peter’s response is direct: repent and be baptised, to which is attached the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

For Christians, however, this is all very familiar and, just so, largely without impact on us today: surely we are beyond this. Our desperate question is one asked, *after* repentance and baptism and having received the Holy Spirit. Our “What must we do?” question might be put differently to ask, why do *we* not see the type of response Luke reports in Acts – 3000 thousand new believers?! What must we do for this to be *our* reality, too? It does not matter that many scholars are convinced that Luke tends to exaggerate and idealise the character of the early church, for we don’t need the numbers to be so large in order to get the point. Had only 3 people responded to Peter’s preaching in faith unto baptism, we might still ask why a mere 3 people have not responded in that way to the ministry exercised by this congregation, and almost every other such congregation in the country, in recent and not-so-recent memory. Whereas those who put the question to after Peter’s preaching are responding the bad news of the gospel, the “What must we do?” of the contemporary Western church grasps after the apparent ineffectiveness of our preaching of the gospel.

But there is a similarity between them and us, as well. The penitent Israelites in our story are confronted with, and convicted of, their involvement in the wrongful death of Jesus; their “what must we do?” relates to a condition of loss. This is the loss of their own righteousness – a revelation of a failure before God – and their question is, effectively, “how might we escape this condition?” When the church finds itself today asking, “What must we do?” in mission, we too speak of a loss, and seek escape from that situation. To ask “What must we do?”, in the way we usually do, identifies what has happened to the churches as being the *fault* of the churches – a failure before God and the world, a loss of righteousness. That we can imagine a “strategic review” – doing things differently with more missionary success – implies that we *might have* done things differently but did not. There is implied the need for repentance here, on the part of the church.

Whether it *is* the failure of the churches which has brought the churches to their current situation in the West is a moot point, but finding somewhere to lay the blame is not my concern here. All I'm concerned about is that we understand what motivates us when we reflect as a community on "What we must do" in mission. This is as much an issue for our local congregation as it is for the Synod. For unless we understand our motivation we will, with the "house of Israel" Peter addresses with his sermon, risk crucifying the things of God, purportedly *for God's sake*.

To get more specific, churches in such circumstances such as ours tend to ask "What must we do?" out of a concern which has missionary dressing but is in fact fundamentally a concern for the church itself. That is, it is very easy to ask the question "what must we do?" with a focus on the benefits *for ourselves* of what we do, rather than the benefits for those who are the subjects of our actions. The interest in mission which has grown so much in the churches in the last generation seems to be largely infected by this confusion: the anxious realisation that we need to do something to turn the tide if there is to be of what we value anything left. But to begin here is to turn mission into manipulation and to treat those to whom we go in mission as means to an end – the survival of the church – and not as an end in themselves. The church, *as we know it*, is not an adequate reason for engaging in mission. For the church to have an *interest* in the outcome of mission is for the church to have God and the world sewn up, and so ultimately to end up standing before Peter with those who crucified Jesus, bewildered that things are not as we imagined. It seems to me that there is much such bewilderment in our churches today.

If there is a review we need to undertake, it is one which asks the "what-to-do" question expecting an answer which involves the same sort of shift we see in the response to Peter's preaching: repentance and liberation.

We cannot plan or work the things of God into existence, either for ourselves or for others. Our plans and actions are not the first movement in God's missionary work. Rather, if we are concerned at all about what to do, we must begin to pray. This might seem a hopeless cop-out, a step which simply puts off the hard work and thinking. But our prayer is to be very specific, and one to which we might expect ourselves to become the answer, even if we don't yet know quite how that will be. We must pray that the risen, crucified Jesus indeed becomes a present reality among us. If this sounds a little mystical and spooky, nothing could be further from the truth. In the exchange between Peter and his audience, the presence of the risen Christ comes with the conviction of sin and failure. To know Christ risen is to learn dark things about ourselves, and so it is to be confronted with the need for deep change in how we view God and the world.

The transforming reality in our story this morning is Christ's presence among those who persecuted and killed him, as one who does not threaten but invites into a new relationship and reality: peace after light, to recall last's weeks reflection. The massive impact of Peter's preaching is not seen in the size of the crowd which responds; the size of the crowd is the sign of how great a change has been effected in the opening of their eyes, for they now understand what has come to pass and ask the honest and open question, "What, then, must we do?"

Transformation for the church today – transformation of the evangelical or gospel kind – will take place in the same kind of way. If we feel we must act, then it should be in such a way as to place ourselves, as individuals and as a community, in situations where we will be confronted with the need for change *in ourselves* and not simply in our actions, and not only in those who don't seem to want to play our game anymore.

If we succeeded in this, then our focus will have shifted from the activist's question about what needs to be done to the deeper question about what we must *be* – forgiven and reconciled. The church then becomes not merely another active agent in the world among other active agents, scheming and strategising, but something of a sacrament: an ordinary thing made extra-ordinary by the action of God, a broken thing made the source of hope, a plain thing the source of beauty.

This this might be possible would indeed be good news for the world, and for the church.

By the grace of God, may the hearing – and becoming – of such good news be the central concern of his people. Amen.
