

Pentecost 23
16/11/2014

Mark the Evangelist

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Psalm 46

Matthew 25:14-30

‘... for you are all children of light and children of the day ...’ (1 Thess 5:5a)

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Chris Mostert

[A] Introduction

Both our readings this morning have an eschatological theme; that is, they focus on the end-times, on what the apostle calls ‘the day of the Lord’. It’s about knowing ‘the times and the seasons’, as he expresses it at the beginning of our Epistle reading for today.

We can easily make two equal and opposite mistakes in reflecting on readings of this type. On one side, we can quickly get into trouble if we interpret the language in which these texts are written too literally; if we forget that it’s highly dramatic and full of colourful metaphor. On the other side, we also make a big mistake if we think that these texts have nothing much to say to clear-thinking and rational people in the 21st century; if we dismiss them as irrelevant for our faith or simply weird.

An example of the latter mistake is to regard these texts as primitive science, which makes no claim on us, except possibly in a demythologised version, referring only to ends and new beginnings in our own personal lives. An example of an over-literal interpretation is that of a strangely eschatological community of about 80 celibate Brothers and Sisters (supported by some married ‘house-holders’) who lived mid-18th century at the *Ephrata Cloister* in Pennsylvania. They were early seventh-day ‘adventists’ who thought that the Lord would return within their life-time and would come ‘like a thief in the night’. Accordingly, they slept on extremely narrow beds – so as not to sleep too much – and, since thieves in the night would break in between midnight and 2 am, they gathered for worship every night at this time in order to be awake at Christ’s coming. Eventually (and unsurprisingly) the community ran out of steam.

[B] Our focus includes the future

We remind ourselves every time we break bread on Sunday that our faith is ineradicably about the *past* [‘Christ has died’], about the *present* [‘Christ is risen’], and about the *future* [‘Christ will come again’]. Jesus’ death is a *past* event of salvific significance. His resurrection implies that he is a *present* reality for us, not just a distant memory. And we hope for *yet more* from him in the *future* on the basis of his reconciling death on the cross: namely the final reconciliation of all things under the reign of God, the universalising of the promise of salvation, the justice of God that is not retaliatory but that puts things to rights and makes things just. That is what we *hope for* from the one who will (in the words of the Creed) ‘come to judge the living and the dead’.

There is certainly a lot yet to be put to rights: a lot of brokenness yet to be healed, a lot of darkness yet to be exposed to the light, a lot of enmity yet to be overcome. That is the ongoing work of Christ, through the Spirit, to be finally accomplished in the fulness of time. Paul knows that the Thessalonian Christians believe this. The church has always included in its faith the hope of a redemption beyond all human possibility, something entirely unpredictable, incalculable and unmanageable by *us*.

In our own time this hope has receded to the margins of our faith, partly because our affluent Western culture is abandoning its long tradition of belief in a God who is creator, redeemer and perfecter of everything that exists; and partly because already 2,000 years have passed since Jesus' resurrection, and the church at first thought that this would be quickly followed by the *Parousia*, a 'second' coming of Christ.

But faith is incomplete if it suspends (let alone rejects) this future element. Hope is one of the modes of faith; it is integral to the Christian narrative. Indeed it is our ultimate hope that grounds our more proximate hopes; the large all-embracing hope makes possible and supports all our nearer and smaller hopes. And it is the resurrection of Jesus that funds and sustains *all* our hopes, large and small, ultimate and immediate.

[C] The future in the present

Having said this, in this Thessalonian letter Paul accentuates the *present* as much as the future. You are (already) 'children of the light', 'children of the day', not of the night or of darkness (5:5). 'You are not to fall asleep but to keep awake, to keep sober'; we might say: to keep on our toes, not to slacken off, not to become distracted.

We need to remember *what* we are and *whose* we are. Jesus Christ, who is himself the light of the world (Jn 12:46), has called us out of darkness into his light (1 Pet 2:9). To believe in the light is to become children of light (Jn 12:35). We have been awakened to the light, but we need constant reminders of this; we need constant awakening.

Our awakening is a *participation* in Christ's own 'awakening', that is his resurrection. In baptism and in the faith that baptism presupposes we are joined to Christ in his death and resurrection. Baptism is a kind of new emergence from the waters of death and darkness, or a kind of awakening from sleep into a new order of life. It is a gift we have received. But since it so easily slips out of our grasp or ceases to animate us, it has constantly to be reappropriated, reclaimed, renewed. Again and again we have to *become* what we already *are*. The indicative mood (a statement of fact) is immediately followed by the imperative mood (a command). 'You *are* children of light, children of the day; therefore *become* children of light, children of the day!'

One small point in passing: by making this connection between what we already *are* and what we need again and again to *become*, we also avoid the binary thinking (and the arrogance) of seeing *ourselves* as being in the light and others as being in darkness; something Christians are not infrequently inclined to do. But a moment's thought should be a reality check: we are not one or the other, but both. It is to the children of *light*, the children of the *day*, that Paul writes about belonging to the day, living in the light. There is no room here for complacency, and certainly not for superiority.

Paul assures his community in Thessalonika that they belong to the new day. They already anticipate it. This means at least two things:

(1) It means that their experience of the present – *their* present – is shaped by what they hope for from the future. However difficult their circumstances may be, they are not without hope, for they have received the Good News and they believe that they are in the hands of a loving God, who will not abandon them. It means that their hope does not desert them, even in suffering. In the black spirituals the hope of 'crossing the Jordan' shed a ray of light to people suffering exploitation in the cotton fields. Elsewhere the hope of freedom and equality empowered people in the struggle against *apartheid*. The hope of a new future always enables people to persist in their struggle for liberation.

(2) But it goes deeper than this. For we are actually already changed by the future. We tend to think we are determined by the past; that the past has made us what we have become. We may not mean this in the hardest sense – most of us are not hard determinists – but we do think in this way. However, we are also, in a significant sense, already what we *shall* be. The reign of God, which will come, already renews us; it already takes form among us, albeit fleetingly. The day of the Lord, which will come, already makes us ‘children of the day’; not perfectly but truly so. This doesn’t happen because of our own efforts or achievements; it is the Holy Spirit whose mission and whose gift it is to bring this future into our midst, into our present. As I said, the resurrection of Jesus is a present reality that empowers us, not simply a fact from the past with no effect on the present. What we *shall* be – when the ‘kingdom’ comes – is what we already, in a sense, *are*.

[D] From eschatology to ethics

When we think or speak about the future, then, we are also saying something about the present. We see this in both the passages in the lectionary for this Sunday. In each case the focus is on the *present*, in the light of the future.

Paul moves from writing about the ‘day of the Lord’ to the shape of our lives as Christians in the present. Already we ‘belong to the day’; therefore live in the light of day, not in darkness! We wear ‘the helmet of salvation’, for which God has destined us. Then put on the breastplate of faith and love! (It’s significant that these are defensive weapons – a helmet and a breastplate – not offensive ones.) And we are to build each other up and encourage one another! That is very important: in this way we can be a gift to each other, and beyond this to others.

Matthew records Jesus’ ‘parable of the talents’, as we now call it. This too is an eschatological parable; it’s not a moral lesson about using your gifts to the maximum. It is about ‘keeping awake’ (25:13) in the face of the ‘day’ of the Lord, or the ‘hour’ in which the ‘bridegroom’ will come, to refer to the previous Sunday’s Gospel reading from. Both parables are about what is proper Christian behaviour in the face of the coming of the Son of Man. The eschatological horizon is essential to the parable. It determined how the parable was heard in Matthew’s own time, when early Jewish *Christians* (the first two servants) were compared favourably with those who strictly guarded the treasure of the *Torah* (the third servant). In our own time it is perhaps about the high-risk venture of faith in a world once again hostile to the gospel and the church, as opposed to those who are fearful or who want to play it safe.

[E] Conclusion

With the coming of Christ the light has shone in the darkness and the darkness has never extinguished the light (Jn1:5). To have heard the gospel is to have been delivered from darkness and to have become ‘children of light’, ‘children of the day’. Even when the future is dark, there is a light that draws us on in hope of the day of the Lord, a guiding, transforming, renewing light. May God grant us this hope and this transformation.

Thanks be to God.
