

Pentecost 2
6/6/2021

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20
Psalm 24
Mark 3:20-35

The sovereignty of God.

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Rob Gallacher

The people of Israel want to be like other nations. And the Lord says, “They have rejected me from being king over them”. Accepting the Lord as your king makes you different from other people around you.

When Jesus began his ministry it was so different that people said, “He has gone out of his mind”. His family went out to restrain him and the Scribes said the he was a servant of Satan.

As Christians we are called to be different from the world around us. The issues have changed. For one thing, some of you will be wanting to get rid of the monarch, whereas Israel was wanting to have one. But there are more significant areas where affirming God as sovereign might cause us to be different. See if we can apply this sovereignty of God to just two sensitive areas this morning – the use of money and the care of the environment.

Of the few Sunday School lessons that I can remember, the one on gambling sticks with me. The teacher made a short list of what was good about gambling, and then a long list about what was bad. The point that made me think was that gambling is not a good way to distribute wealth. Winner takes all leaves a lot of losers with nothing. “Over the course of your lifetime”, said the teacher, “you will handle a large amount of money. Consider well what you do with it.” That led into the concept of stewardship. What I have is not my own. It is a gift entrusted to me with which to do good. Being a Methodist, this was backed up by John Wesley’s sermon on money – Earn all you can, save all you can and give all you can. Wesley himself said, “In the first year that I earned money, I received 30 pounds. I lived on 28 and gave away 2. The next year I earned 50 pounds. I lived on 28 and gave away 22. The third year “and so on.

Some years ago I returned from a conference of Reformed Churches in Ghana. The conference had been very strong on resisting the exploitation of the poor by the rich. An incident drove this home. We were in a taxi in the centre of Accra, when I mentioned that I would like to taste Ghanaian chocolate. The driver pulled over and beckoned to a young lady who was carrying a large plate on her head stacked with chocolate bars. I gave her the small amount asked for. She reached up and retrieved a chocolate bar. And on we went. The chocolate was terrible. I guess it had been on her head, in the tropical sun, for a very long time. When I looked at the world through the eyes of that chocolate seller, in the context of the conference message, I asked myself, “What can I do?” One thing was to increase my contributions to overseas aid. It so happened that the small increase in my contribution, coincided with the Australian Government slashing millions from its foreign aid budget.

It is seldom easy to affirm the sovereignty of God, and to actually make a difference. Consider our present situation. We already live in a society based on selfishness and driven by consumption. Yet our government want us to spend, spend, spend our way

out of recession. But I am not convinced about buying what I do not need and have nowhere to put. Instead of being like everyone else and complaining about the rigours of lockdown, is there something positive that we can do to alleviate suffering? A caring phone call here and there is not too difficult, but when it comes to people watching their businesses fall apart, or workers losing wages the only schemes I could come up with were deeply flawed. Our Mark the Evangelist News has been encouraging us to donate to the Christian Hospital in Vellore, so we can do something about the dire situation in India, but what about here? All I can do is raise the question, “What does it mean here and now to affirm that God is sovereign, and how do we steward our resources to that end?”

I turn now to the care of the environment. I want to affirm all the concern being expressed about global warming and climate change, but it’s not enough. Our Christian faith should add a spiritual dimension to what is being said. You only have to listen to Greta Thunberg for a few minutes to see a clear pattern. With emotion she will express fear about the world she will have to live in, and then she supports this with scientific data. The formula of fear and figures must be heard, but there is more that needs to be said. In Psalm 24 the Psalmist starts, “The earth is the Lord’s”. That sets us on the pathway of sovereignty and stewardship. The earth is the Lord’s, and our role, says Genesis 2:15 is to till it and to keep it. It is this more spiritual attitude that is under-stated. In 2019 the Assembly put out a “Vision Statement for a Just Australia”. It says, “The Uniting Church believes the whole world is God’s good creation It takes seriously our responsibility to care for the whole creation.” Sovereignty and stewardship are implied. But we can go still deeper.

Simon Winchester, near the end of his book called “Land” quotes from the indigenous chief, Sealth. When he was asked to sell his land to the government of the United States he replied, “Buy or sell the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of the earth is sacred to my people....” The government went ahead anyway. They carved the land up and sold it off in bits. Sky scrapers were built on it, and as a final insult, they named the city after the chief – Seattle.

Much the same happened with the indigenous people in Australia. In his book, “Changing Fortunes” our own David Radcliffe has documented how it happened in this very area, and how Batman and his associates had misgivings about the treaty they wrote, but went ahead anyway. So we too have private ownership of little bits. Caring for your own little patch can develop into an affinity with nature. On a larger scale, that spiritual connection with God’s creation may develop into a sense of awe and wonder at the beauty and mystery of God’s life in nature. Jan Morgan and Graeme Garrett, who teach at theological colleges here in Melbourne, have written “On the Edge”. They have a discipline of standing still for half an hour each day, listening to the ocean. “They have gone out of their minds”, some will say. But what the ocean has told them over time is very moving.

At one point David Radcliffe (p 61) says: “As a society we still struggle with fundamental questions about our relationship with the natural environment. Is it a finite, renewable resource to be stewarded wisely or something to be exploited in the immediate term with scant regard for any longer-term ecological consequences?”

It would help if people, especially the decision makers, could see the beauty of the earth and sense the hand of the creator who is behind it all. We might even say who is through it all. If we confess that the earth is the Lord's our care for the environment becomes a sacred trust, an act of worship, a way of participating in the life of God.

A couple of weeks ago, in "With Love to the World," a past president of the Uniting Church, James Haire, was commenting on a passage in Ephesians. He said, "political and social norms and powers are useful secondary guides in life, but they cannot replace our prime allegiance to the ascended and ruling Christ ... We are called to live out our primary allegiance to Christ in our lives".

The view that our money, our land and our environment are not our own, but gifts of which we are stewards will make us different from many. Some will say we are out of our minds, and seek to make us like other nations, wanting us to turn away from the living God whom we acknowledge as Lord and sovereign of all the earth, and for whom we are stewards.
