

Pentecost 10
14/8/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Psalm 82
Luke 12:49-56

A thought about your funeral

*In a sentence:
For all the good (and bad we do),
God remains hopelessly devoted to us*

On Tuesday, I again turned to discover the top item in the day's news feed, to serve as a launching place for today's sermon. I found there what I'd heard that earlier morning: that Olivia Newton-John had died overnight. I then realised that a "Greatest Hits" collection of her songs was quietly playing away in the background in the café where I was reading about this. Perhaps a sign from God?

Newton-John was talented and gorgeous, seeming to be the kind of person many would be happy to have as daughter, friend or lover. Rising to prominence as she did in the 60s and 70s, her bright personal style seemed to reflect something of the country's own developing self-perception, and she made big on the international scene just as Australia itself was becoming increasingly aware of its own international presence and possibilities; "our Olivia" singing and starring was another "goal" kicked for Australia. Later in life, Newton-John's public struggle with cancer also became representative of similar hardships among her fans.

It is meaningful and right, then, to say that Newton-John was an "Australian icon". The Greek word *eikon* is what the New Testament uses to speak of religious idols, and of Jesus as an "image" or icon of God (e.g. Colossians 1.15). An Australian icon is, then, properly an "image" of Australia, encapsulating something of our essence. At least in the first couple of decades of her career, Newton-John seemed to do just that.

When our icons die, we hear what they achieved and what they stood for, principally from those who loved them for it. In this way, we "eulogise" the dead, to borrow another Greek term which means "speaking good of". We gather to remember, to mourn and to tell stories.

And this brings me to a connection we can draw between the eulogising of Newton-John and the not unreasonably expectation that most of us, too, will one day be eulogised. Because, for the most part, we are icons to those who love us, if on a smaller scale than our celebrities, and the dynamic of story-telling is not different whether we have lived loudly or quietly. What is the "good word" to be heard at our funerals when the time comes?!

Let's take it as a starting point that a eulogy should tell the truth. What does this mean? Our icons invite us to be wholly affirmative as we tell their story, and there's been plenty of that this week. It seems bad taste to darken death with accounts of the darker corners in our lives, and we fear being judged for presuming to judge others and tarnishing the image. Of course, we make a judgement already if we choose to speak only the good, laying fig leaves over any regrettable nakedness that might be exposed if we peeked behind.

And yet, we have a problem if we only bury saints who did no wrong and victors who always prevailed, because a funeral gathers a room full of sinners, victims and losers. What we hear about him who died and what made his life worthwhile is also being said about us sitting in the congregation, and it may not fit very well – they are too unlike us in all our good and bad realities. A good funeral service – and the Uniting Church has a pretty good basic funeral service – allows that the saint we gather to remember was also a sinner. We are each icons – images – of more (or less!) than just the best we allow to be seen or acknowledged. If we are saints – and the funeral service also declares this – it is *despite* the truth about lives as much as because of it.

Within our Uniting Church funeral service are elements which make explicit that even if we gather to bury one of our icons, she is not much different from us. And so we pray,

In strength and in weakness, in achievement and failure, in the brightness of joy and the darkness of despair, we remember her as one of us...

We are also encouraged to pray,

...we confess that we have not always lived as your grateful children; we have not loved as Christ loved us...forgive us if there have been times when we failed her.

Then, scandalously to some ears, we also pray,

Enable us by your grace to forgive anything that was hurtful to us.

These little prayers are not much in the whole sweep of what is said in a funeral, but they mark the vision of human being in the service. We are one of each other: able to hurt and be hurt, and in need of forgiveness and reconciliation, as well as able to be the good which others will one day miss. This is very often difficult to acknowledge around the time of death: that the life our loved ones have lived – even if it has seemed to be a good one – has not been complete or whole, and neither yet is our own.

In our reading from the letter to the Hebrews this morning, there is a strange twist. Great Old Testament icons of the faith are recalled, who variously were

“...stoned to death...were sawn in two...killed by the sword...they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented...”

In this, for the writer, they were terrifyingly exemplary. Yet faith icons though they are, the writer goes on to say that *even they* “did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.” Those who seemed to have achieved so much are yet incomplete. They – in some way – need us. The dead depend somehow on the living. Or, more precisely, the truth of the dead depends on the truth of the living.

What is the truth of the living? The writer goes on: the dead look to us as we look to Jesus, whom the writer calls the “pioneer and perfecter” of our faith, the pioneer and perfecter of our very lives. With this, the letter reminds us that there is a second story to be considered alongside our own: our story is told within the encapsulating story of Jesus, pioneer and perfecter, beginning and end.

And so, a Christian funeral tells these two stories and not just one. There is, of course, our story: what we did and what was done to us. And there is Christ’s story, within which our story is placed. This second story is widely overlooked. Even in Christian funerals, it is often reduced to serve as an extension of our story, becoming a comforting religious bit to help with the mess of hearts and minds death leaves behind.

The overgrown eulogising which dominates in many funerals today is a sign that we don't know any other story to tell, and so we tell only that of the deceased – as much of it as we dare. And so the death of one who lived life badly, or whose life was cut far too short, leaves us speechless. If they have not yet done anything or did nothing good, what can we say?

To tell just the one story is to misunderstand the funeral as being only about the deceased. Rather, funerals are about the living, not the dead. The second story about Jesus – the pioneer and perfecter, the beginning and the end – is told to catch us *all* up together, the image-icon we gather to remember *and us* who saw ourselves in the icon we have lost.

We are, of course, entirely dedicated to knowing just how good we are and how good or bad others might be. We make these judgements not only in eulogies but in other assessments of ourselves and others along the way. Yet Christian faith shifts the focus: not only what we do but also what God gives and does: this is the whole of us. There is a pioneer from whom we spring and a perfecter who fills us to completion.

Hearing this is not just the work of the funeral. Sunday's services share in the same logic: a naming that we are less, and more, than we know. If we are doing it properly, Sunday worship should address us in such a way as to *want* to turn away from self-fascination and self-judgement towards an openness to a life which springs from and is completed by others. Sunday's word is that we do not start ourselves and we do not finish ourselves: we are pioneered and perfected as much despite what we do as because of it.

There is freedom and peace in this: we are not measured, assessed or tested by God, even if we do this to each other. And we need not do this *to ourselves or each other* – proving or testing whether we and they are worthy of good words, of rich eulogising. If the wholeness of Jesus himself encapsulates us as pioneer and perfecter, we are not under scrutiny: we have been well started and will be well finished. We can, then, be honest about ourselves without fear of judgement.

A life well-lived is one freely received and expressed in this light: now in strength and now in weakness, now in achievement and now in failure, now knowing the brightness of joy and, now, the darkness of despair. Such a good-and-bad life is finally worthy of a *good* word because it rests in a goodness greater than our own. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our lives. This means that, in our best works *and* in our worst, God's word to us is, "I'm *hopelessly* devoted to you". Every love song is on its way to becoming a psalm.

The good word about God – God's own eulogy – is the beginning and the end of the good word to be said about us.
