

Pentecost 19
16/10/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 31:27-34
Psalm 121
Luke 18:1-8

Of Prayer and Netflix

In a sentence:

Prayer requires a vision for peace for the whole

Conventional wisdom has it that when the going gets tough...there's always Netflix. Of course, that's not quite how the saying goes, but could it speak a truth about our infatuation with binge-watching inexhaustible streaming services? While storytelling and story consumption are deeply embedded within us, this is not enough to account for the explosion of streaming subscriptions and our consumption rate of films and TV series. No small part of this must be the escape the screen offers. There is much from which we want to escape, of which the headlines and TV news reports are sufficient evidence, whatever else might be happening in our personal lives. But video streaming is scarcely the only means of escape. Grey nomads across the country are getting away from it all in droves, extending indefinitely the escape the rest of us hang out for in this land of the long weekend. Gamers disappear into parallel universes for hours or days on end. We can escape into exercise and the body beautiful, or self-consoling overeating, or radical political and religious causes which provide meaning and refuge within the chaos. Or we can simply avoid the daily news for the stress it induces and not venture out too much.

The point here is not to criticise the much-needed holiday, the relaxing weekend immersed in a favourite TV series or setting different priorities from those of our parents' generation – whichever generation that was! The point is to express the suspicion that, perhaps for most in the modern world, life is lived in the mode of distraction from life. If this is true, it is because of a perceived inadequacy of the story we are presently living, or even the unliveability of that story. A few brave souls – or perhaps deluded ones – don't experience themselves in this contradicted way. But many of us have become more adept at losing ourselves in stories rather than featuring in them.

My interest this morning is not Netflix or purveyors of other streaming services and means of comforting distraction. Rather, I'm interested in prayer as it features in today's Gospel reading. What we think prayer might be is controlled by our response to the story we think we are living, because prayer has to do with *changing* our stories. If video streaming or early retirement or upgrading a spouse or drinking ourselves into oblivion is about leaving behind our present uncomfortable story, then this will affect our sense for prayer. In particular, if escape is our mode of coping, we've already decided that prayer cannot help us with our uncomfortable existence. Those escape artists who still pray do so *as* escapees. The escape is a disconnection from the whole, so that the escapee's prayer is now not about the whole but about the individual. My inner, personal spirituality and communion with God *become* my escape. I'm spiritual-but-not-religious because religion is worldly, and the world is what I'm leaving behind. Prayer turns inward because that is the only place I find myself to be safe. Prayer beyond this is pointless for those who have lost hope that there is a story of the world other than that of grim newsfeeds with their wars and rumours of wars, and in which "everyone is angry about everything all the time". At best, prayer might help my inner

story by re-storying me apart from the wider world. Such prayer is now not *for* the world with its roar of cascading, contradictory stories but *against* that world.

At the end of today's reading, Jesus asks, "...when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?". That is, at the final setting right of all things, will there be anyone left who is *praying for* that setting right? Clearly, there may still be prayer, in the sense of those inward-looking prayers in the hearts of the escapees. But the faith and its praying sought by Jesus is not this. It is the faith suggested by the widow's persistence in his parable. If her constant harassing of the lazy judge is what prayer is to be like, such prayer bears no marks of escapism. She *lives* her uncomfortable story as she seeks to see it changed. Her effort is not towards escape but transformation. As one of the tough, she gets going in action which models the kind of prayer which wants to change the world's story. This kind of prayer – and action – denies the world's brokenness from within that world. It is, then, prayer not against the world, justifying my flight, but prayer for it, necessitating my staying. This prayer does not abandon ship but can only be prayed from onboard.

This is the very ministry of Jesus. He is pushed out of the world onto the cross by us in a kind of reverse escapism; the world-as-a-whole can't flee but it can fling just the one Jesus away. Yet, true to his deeply world-centred existence, Jesus will not be suppressed or escaped. And so he prays even from that cross – literally from *on-board*, both within the world and cast out of it: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what to do"; they don't know how to pray. Such prayer seeks community even out of alienating rejection. Prayer like this expresses a vision of the reconciliation of the whole world. This world so deeply divided by cynicism, contempt and fear needs a faith which will do this work of prayer – a work that can only be done from within the brokenness and not from outside.

And so this is the kind of prayer, work and life to which we are called. This is the taking up of our own cross after Jesus, with prayer that *leans into* the world and not away from it. It prays for the coming of God's peaceable kingdom; that earth become heaven; for bread, grace and safety. Outside the world which is not yet its true self, but within it and sharing in its brokenness, we pray and work for the forgiveness, reconciliation and wholeness which will make all things – even us – new.

In such prayer and the active struggle for life it expressed, let us be unceasing.
