

Lent 4
10/3/2024

Mark the Evangelist

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107

Ephesians 2:4-10

John 3:14-21

Just as the Moses lifted up the serpent

Sermon preached by Daniel Broadstock

Friends, I'm so pleased to be with you again at Mark the Evangelist. Thank you for so much for your kind hospitality.

Friends, we are now well into the season of Lent, that period of the church calendar in which we wander spiritually with Jesus in the desert of discernment and reflection. At my home church at Brunswick Uniting we are thinking through Lent in terms of what we are turning towards and what we are turning away from. What parts of our life do we wish to be in greater abundance, filled with greater joy, growing with more vitality, more connected in our relationship to God? More connected in our relationship to the Holy Spirit and to Creation? Walking more closely in our discipleship with Jesus?

And what parts of our life are we aware of hard-heartedness? What are we holding on too tightly to? Where are we missing the mark? Where do our actions fail to match our words? Where are there oversights and unkindnesses and lapses and blindness. Where is the fruit growing, and where do the weeds need to be pulled up?

Human flaws and imperfections have been very much on my mind this week as I have been watching *Nemesis*, the ABC documentary on the Liberal Party in power. Has anyone else seen *Nemesis*? What did you think?

It's a brilliant piece of political reporting as much as it is a compelling examination of human nature.

For those of you who haven't seen it, it's filmed in three episodes, one for each of the Prime Ministers who occupied the office during the nine years of the previous Liberal government: Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull, and Scott Morrison.

In classical literary theory there is a concept called *hamartia*, which refers to the fatal flaw of the tragic protagonist that ultimately sows their undoing. Most commonly, the hamartia of the ancient Greeks was pride or hubris, as they tempt the wrath of the gods by their unshakeable confidence in their own indestructability. Achilles is undone by his hamartia as he is shot through with an arrow at the sole point of his vulnerability. Icarus is brought crashing down to earth by his hamartia as the sun melts and sears away his wings of wax. King Midas gives in to his greed and watches as it consumes everything that he loves.

It's hard not to watch *Nemesis* and see in the stories of those politicians this classical Greek idea of hamartia. Each of the three, so different in temperament and outlook and disposition, but each of the three ultimately undone by their own personal fatal flaws.

Many politicians past and present participate in the documentary, and almost without exception I was impressed by their honesty, reflectiveness, and willingness to admit error, even if there is plenty of the usual justification and legacy-protecting that always shadows this kind of auditing of the past.

The first of three: Tony Abbott. The 'Mad Monk', the convinced Catholic, the right-wing crusader, the ideologue, the boxer. Acknowledged by many of his friends for his personal decency, for his thoughtfulness, his genuine concern for First Nations peoples, his commitment. The most formidable opposition leader, the sharpest nose for blood in the water, the sloganeer, the disciplined one, the day-in-day-out on-message warrior. But also unable to hide his discomfort in modern Australia. Inflexible on climate policy. Stubborn in his defence of Australia's colonial past. Old-fashioned. Seen as a bit too rough around the edges for leadership. A divisive figure.

The second: Malcolm Turnbull. The suave, pragmatic moderate. The favourite of the well-heeled affluent classes. Eloquent, forceful, supremely intelligent, uninterested in the culture wars. The tech entrepreneur, the financier, at home in the velvet world of international diplomacy and big-dollar donors. The great white hope of those who longed for conciliation, unification, for practical solutions to the problems of climate, immigration, and taxation that had dogged Australia for decades. But of the three, the most ill-at-ease in his party. Never one to suffer fools, and in compromising with the right-wing of his party divided himself again and again until there wasn't much left.

The last: Scott Morrison. The middle-man, the consensus choice. The Stephen Bradbury perhaps. A formidable machine man who expected loyalty from those around him and brought together a party that seemed divided beyond repair. The Pentecostal, the man of faith, the hardline immigration minister and the dedicated family man. The Prime Minister who prayed for his colleagues and won the unwinnable election. But dogged by poor judgement calls and bad perceptions. Perceived as aloof and arrogant, and who never lived down his fatal holiday to Hawai'i.

Three Prime Ministers, three imperfect people. Each of them rising in glory and falling in disaster. Each of them failing to achieve at least in part what they had hoped.

In our reading today, John speaks of Jesus being 'lifted up'. There is a deep irony in this expression because it describes Jesus' crucifixion. For Jesus, in being 'lifted up' there is exaltation and nobility, and even a kind of glory, but there is also pain, humiliation, and suffering. It is an unenviable honour that Jesus experiences in the way of discipleship. Perhaps our three Prime Ministers could relate in some way to this complicated 'lifting up'. This is the pattern of our world. What goes up must come down. Victory is always swallowed up in defeat or death in the end. Our leaders burn brightly before they burn out. Our own achievements lose their sweetness with time and as we naturally turn toward the next thing.

As we've heard, John compares the 'lifting up' of Jesus to a story from the book of Numbers, in which the Israelites are thirstily enduring their long pilgrimage to the Promised Land of Canaan. Frustrated again by the Israelites' hardheartedness and ingratitude, the story tells that God sends snakes among them to bite them, a reproof of their foolishness. But even in his rebuking, God offers them a way back into mercy and relationship. "Make a poisonous serpent," says the Lord, "and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."

And now John invites us to look upon Jesus and be healed. To look upon Jesus and live. To see him 'lifted up' in glory and sacrificing servanthood. To see that he is our way back. He is our sign of restored relationship and peace. He is our way to eternal life – or perhaps it would be better to say – our way to eternity's life. God's life. The eternal now that breaks in with God's presence, that changes everything. That endures forever.

Jesus is lifted up, not for his own fault, but for the fault of the world. For the disordered, disconnected way that we live, in broken relationship with each other and with God. For we have all been bitten by the serpent. We all have our own hamartia, our own fatal

flaws that lead us astray. Our world is filled with bleeding snakebites. The rise and fall of our leaders tells us that. The intractability of conflict and poverty tells us that. The failure of world leaders to find a ceasefire in Gaza tells us that. The whispering thoughts of unkindness and violence and idolism in our own hearts tells us that. We all have those things that we must turn further towards and those things that we must turn further from.

But John tells us: the Son of Man does not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save it. To shine the love of God. 'God so loved the world'. A complete revolution of perspective for the ancient world. The ancient gods did nothing for nothing. The Roman gods might reward you or punish you. They might show you some special favour or put you in your place, but they would never, ever love you.

God loves the world. God loves the world. And this is how God moves toward the world in love. By lifting up the Son of Man. By breaking the patterns of worldly glory in their rising and falling. By leading us into joy that is not temporal. That does not pass away. That does not rise and fall with political fortunes. By offering us today and every day, a way back into loving relationship. Thanks be to God.

Look upon Jesus and be healed. Look upon Jesus and live.

Amen.
