

All Saints
27/10/2024

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 21:1-6a
John 11:32-44

... all things new

Sermon preached by Rev. Rob Gotch

Over the past few weeks, the lectionary has drawn passages from the middle chapters of Mark's gospel, and also from the letter to the Hebrews. This letter explores the obedience, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus as the one begotten by God and appointed as great high priest to appear forever before God on our behalf. The many significant declarations made in this letter follow the no less significant introduction: 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. Jesus is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.'

In order to speak this powerful word, Jesus arrives in the midst of human history, gathering a community of disciples and engaging in a ministry of healing, truth telling, justice seeking, and restoration. As this journey unfolds, Jesus teaches his disciples about the kingdom of God, a kingdom that he inaugurates through his own humble self-giving. Over and against assumptions that kingdoms are created and sustained only through the exercise of oppressive imperial power, Jesus inaugurates the kingdom of God by submitting to that power. Three times in Mark's gospel Jesus describes his impending passion, and on each occasion the misunderstanding and fear of the disciples beckons to us across the centuries and invites us to wonder about our own discipleship.

On this day that recalls the All-Saints tradition of the church, we shift briefly away from Mark's gospel to read from the gospel according to John. We read about the raising of Lazarus, and the apocalyptic literature in Isaiah 25 and Revelation 21, in which God's oppressed and persecuted people hear words of hope about how God will wipe away all tears and swallow up death forever. I suspect that much of the church's most precious literature was written by those who were facing the end of life as they knew it. So perhaps that's the key for how we should read that literature in our own place and time.

There are many things in our own context that threaten life as we know it: the obscene profit of those who peddle weapons of war; the unaccountable exploitation of the politics of fear; the loss of confidence in, and commitment to, shared truth; the blind reliance on economic growth to build common wealth; the rampant greed of industries that refuse to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. And just recently, the word apocalypse has been used to describe the shocking devastation of life, limb and infrastructure in Gaza, and the flood ravaged Spanish city of Valencia. These things certainly threaten life as we know it, but do they also constitute an apocalypse in which the hiddenness of God is revealed to sustain God's people in faith and hope? Indeed, what would such an apocalypse look like?

In the gospel passage we hear the pain of Mary's grief when she says to Jesus: 'Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died.' And we also note the deep irony in the lament of her community: 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept Lazarus from dying?'

How does this connect with your own experiences, feelings and fears about the things that threaten life as we know it? Can you imagine yourself lamenting: 'Lord, if you'd been here, the things that threaten life as we know it would not cause so much anxiety and grief?' Friends, if you can ask this question, then I hope you can also believe that, just as Jesus wept for the family and community of Lazarus, so too does he weep over your uncertainty and disorientation.

But note that his weeping in the gospel passage is not the end of the story. It's not enough for him to draw alongside Mary and Martha and their community in empathy and compassion. He prays for that community, but not for some vague blessing, or that God will draw near in comfort and peace, or that God will journey with them and sustain them in hope. These are all fine sentiments, and I've used such words myself many times, but this is not what Jesus offers in his prayer. Rather, he declares that the purpose of his prayer is that those hearing him may believe that he has been sent by the one to whom he prays. And it's because he's been sent by the God of life that, upon the command of Jesus, Lazarus comes out of the tomb. We're told that many people who see what Jesus has done believe in him. They come to faith in Jesus, not just as a great teacher or miracle worker, but as the one who has power over life and death.

Indeed, this is the real and only purpose of miracles in the gospels – miracles are signs that Jesus is himself the embodiment of the kingdom he proclaims. Apocalyptic literature graphically recalls the life denying forces in our world, but it also affirms that these forces have been overcome by God; the God, according to John's Gospel, whose Word became flesh to speak life into the world. This Word, silenced briefly upon a cross, now speaks forever through an empty tomb, breathing the peace of his Spirit upon his fearful disciples in every age.

The crises of our time are deeply challenging, and it's tempting to define them as an apocalypse. They certainly seem to threaten life as we know it, but it's not clear to me how they also declare hope in the God who draws near. In fact, the most significant crisis before us is also the most unexpected one, because it comes to us through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The phrase 'lurching from one crisis to another' is sometimes used to describe a person or an institution that is out of control and about to descend into complete chaos. This phrase reflects the notions of control and power that are so desired in our society, and in which a crisis is something to be avoided or managed.

But the Gospel declares the crisis of the cross; not a crisis to be avoided or managed, but a crisis by which we are invited to recognise the tombs of darkness, doubt and despair from which Jesus yearns to release us. Thanks be to God, whose Word gathers his saints in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, welcoming them to his banqueting table, where he offers himself in bread and wine, and raises us into life as his body. Thanks be to God for the one who declares: 'Behold, I am making all things new.'

And now to the holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, three persons and one God, be all glory and praise, dominion and power, now and forever. Amen.
