

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
PROPER 24
SUNDAY 20 OCTOBER 2013
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Mark 4: 35-41, Psalm 121, Mark 8: 29-35

“Lifting Our Eyes”

The gospel of Mark was written at a difficult time for the Church and designed to encourage and support people who had every reason to lose faith in the face of devastating challenges. The temple in Jerusalem had recently been destroyed and faith communities that had depended on its leadership and support had imploded with it. Institutional Judaism was all but wiped out as a consequence and the fledgling Christian Community, still very much connected and identified with it, had come under severe pressure to die with it. At the time it must have seemed, to any sensible soul, that it would be only a matter of time until they too would die and disappear from the religious scene.

It is good to realise this, when we read the gospel of Mark. That it is a gospel written at a time of great distress, with future prospects for the Church bleaker than we can even begin to imagine. And realistically so. Humanly speaking there was no hope, no future, nothing but maybe a few hundred people who were still finding their way into a faith that lacked coherence, definition, clear vision and competent leadership. The letters of Paul testify to this. Division, miscommunication, discord, jealousy, incompetence, human ambition, pride, arrogance, ignorance to name but a few, were trying their hardest to undermine and destroy the Christian Community. Put fear of persecution and loss of personal and social security on top of that, and you'll get a picture not unlike, but much worse, than the one we are facing right now under the yoke of “Special Circumstances”.

I guess what I am saying is, even though to us it may feel as if the Church is crashing down around our ears, the Church has seen worse than this. And that it may be good to listen to the voices speaking into an equally or even more difficult time way back then to gain some wisdom and insight to help us with what we are facing now.

So what does Mark do when he and his community were confronted with difficult circumstances two thousand years ago?

First of all he invents a new genre. The good news genre.

Not a biography, not a history, not a book listing the wise words of the Master, or to pay tribute to a revered hero, event or god, but a book designed to give guidance and support to a community, inviting them to enter into the story and to start living it, following in the footsteps of its main characters.

That had never been done before. And it is likely it was done because of the pressure, and the despair that was on the author and his people at the time. The stories about Jesus and his words, were, with the death of many of the original disciples, disappearing fast. While the Christian community was small and vulnerable, it was in need of more than just stories and wise words at the same time. And so Mark invents the gospel, preserving precious memories of Jesus and, at the same time, putting them in a framework that will support his community in their time of trial.

He shapes his writing carefully. It's not “just” a gathering of memories. No, the memories are gathered into a framework designed to build the faith of his audience and help them find their way towards a deeper understanding of what it means to be a follower of the man his writings portray.

He very cleverly layers his gospel and enables each person at different stages of their faith to engage at their own level. He carefully designs the end of his gospel at what is now, in our bibles chapter 16:8. An open end cleverly inviting people to go back to the start of the book and read it again. And again. Every time to discover more and deeper truths about Jesus and what it means to be following him.

Linguistic analysis of the text shows that the gospel is organised along several different story lines that all interact and interweave to form a complex and rich tapestry of meaning.

One such framework is the geographical one. On the surface this is easy enough: The gospel tells the story of Jesus traveling from Galilee, where his ministry starts, to Jerusalem, where it finishes. If we look closer, however, we see that there is more to that than one might think at first sight.

Galilee, the place where it all starts, is the place of success, of people joining, of carefree and happy times of flourishing ministry and growing recognition of Jesus. With Jerusalem, the place where it all finishes, the place of the dead occurs, of enemies and growing trouble and derision, of death. It is important to realise those two places are not arbitrary, not “just” places, they stand for something, something more than “just” geographical locations.

Galilee, known as a place that many gentiles called home, and where people weren’t too strict about their faith, and Jerusalem, the place of the (soon to be destroyed) temple, the heart of law abiding, pious Judaism. These are positioned at either end of the gospel to tell their own story about what happened. With Galilee and the gentiles, “the others” receiving and supporting Jesus with enthusiasm, and “the law”, “the temple”, traditional, institutional Judaism, putting him on the cross.

Look! The gospel says, the temple may be destroyed, with traditional institutional Judaism collapsing with it. It may look like the faith community, as we know it, is on the brink of extinction, but look at what happened when Jesus was around. The time of inspiration, of miracles, of growth was not with organised religion and faith, with traditional faith communities and traditional piety, but somewhere nobody thought anything good could ever come from: Galilee.

And, we, here and now, may well take that message to heart. If we expect miracles and inspiration from institutional faith, organised religion, established faith communities and traditional piety we may well be looking in the wrong direction. Jesus was never there to start with, and we should not be surprised if that is not where we will find him now. Perhaps now the institution is failing, and our traditional piety has lost its potential for growth, the time has come to go back to Galilee, where it all started, and look outside the traditional framework of our faith.

That’s one story.

Then, in between Galilee and Jerusalem something interesting happens in the gospel. There is a lull, bracketed by the two passages we read today. The storm on the lake, and Peter’s denial to accept Jesus’ words about his future suffering.

While the words Galilee and Jerusalem fall away as indicators of geographical location, the word “grave” starts turning up in disturbing quantity in this section. There is a feeding of 4000 people and then 5000. With 12 baskets of leftovers and then 7, 12 signifying there is enough for all the tribes of Israel, and 7 signifying there is even enough for all the nations of what Jesus has to offer.

Then there is another story about the disciples weathering a storm in a boat. And in between we hear how illness and death lose their power where Jesus appears. At the heart of the gospel, between the enthusiasm and success of Galilee and the failure and death of Jerusalem, we find Jesus in amongst graves, on the water in stormy weather, in charge of the elements, feeding ever larger numbers of people, healing and conquering death left right and centre.

When he asks, after all of that, “Who do you think I am?” Peter thinks he knows the answer: “You are the Christ!”

Most of us would have done the same, wouldn't you think? It's clear after all of that isn't it? The success, the huge numbers following, the power over the elements, the victory over the forces of death, the miracles, the feedings, of course, who else could he be?

I am too young to have experienced the glory days of suburban Christianity as most of you have known it. Numbers in Sunday school had already started to dwindle when I got to that age, and I was never part of a flourishing youth group. I've only experienced full Churches at Christmas and Easter and as a minister I have forever been battling declining numbers and increasingly bleak future outlooks. As a Christian I may have experienced a little bit of the tail end of Galilee, but most of my Church life I have been on the road to Jerusalem: To decline, destruction, devastation, and death. A journey where it was never easy and became increasingly difficult to claim “you are the Christ”, because it was no longer as obvious as it had been before. I have been, for most of my life, part of a dying institution, a declining faith community, a fast disappearing traditional way of faith.

My experience of faith is, to speak in Mark's terms, the imminent threat of Jerusalem, and not the success of Galilee, the unsettling feeling that all may not be well, instead of the confidence of backing a winning horse. But, like for both Jews and Christians in the first century the destruction of the temple and the collapse of institutional Judaism was unimaginable, the death of the institutional Church, and the collapse of what seemed so strong and indestructible, of tradition and a way of doing things so deeply embedded in our personal and communal lives has, even for me, hitherto been hard to accept as a possibility.

Even in the midst of the current crisis I have heard others say, and have myself at times found clinging to the thought that surely any minute now Jesus will wake up and put the storm to rest so we can continue as before. As a faith community, doing our job, and following him. That surely any minute now Jesus will come, walking across the waves that threaten to sink the ship of the Church and pull us out and lead us back to the days of growth and glory? I find myself hoping against hope that surely any minute now we will find ourselves once more on a green hill, breaking bread with plenty left over to share around. God is still with us, isn't he?

Lifting my eyes to the heights, as those pilgrims of old on their way to Jerusalem singing psalm 121 and other pilgrim psalms. I don't know about you, but I don't see that many hopeful signs of renewal of our way of being. As didn't they! The road of the pilgrim people of old was treacherous, full of dangers, wild animals and steep, narrow paths making the journey exceedingly hard. And when they lifted their eyes? They'd see the heights, where the pagan gods of fertility and success were ever popular and worshipped with abandon. Drawing them to join in their much easier ways and rites. Just as we are. Feeling pressure from all sides to abandon our God and his ways and join with those who worship the forces of nature and the law of the jungle.

I believe that with Special Circumstances our Church has, to a degree, let herself be forced to cave into those forces and that law. It has lifted her eyes to the heights, despairing of the difficult and narrow path it was called to follow, and has given in to the worship and leadership of other powers than Christ. With devastating effect. Heartbreak, trauma, sorrow, division, confusion, anger, and grief abound in a Church that has lost control and direction and seems to be randomly tossed on the waves of the storm it has unleashed.

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Jesus responds with a question: “Why are you so fearful?” Haven't you seen what I can do? Don't you understand I even have death under my feet? Don't you see that what I offer is stronger than the forces of death? Can't you trust me?

No! In the face of death and destruction, of a great storm threatening to destroy what we have and what we know, in the face of imminent disaster, we, like the disciples, find it difficult to muster faith. In Galilee, when all was going well, even with the odd fight and crisis of faith, "You are the Christ" came much more easily to our lips. And even after a couple of major crises, still, like Peter, we found the words, the faith, the certainty, the confidence to confess Jesus as Lord.

But in the face of death, feeling the Church is disintegrating around us? It becomes a lot harder.

The Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected and killed, the temple destroyed, the unthinkable, unimaginable may have to happen, death unleashed in all its terror before there is a way back to that place where it all began, the place of inspiration and faith, of growth and strength, of healing and resurrection.

I lift my eyes to the heights and see nothing but threat and danger. Feel the pull away from the road I'm on, as a pilgrim, as a follower of the way of Christ. Find it exceedingly difficult to hold on to the next sentence: "My help is from the Lord, who...", and the next, and the next... until I feel and know what the end of it says: "That the Lord shall preserve my going out and my coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore".

That is faith, that is being a follower of Christ. Not the easy going of Galilee alone, not the ups and downs of storms and miracles alternating with spells of wonder and success, but a journey through the depths of despair and even death where we may feel utterly deserted and alone, at the mercy of forces beyond our control and discover that somehow, somewhere the voice of love, of peace, of justice is still speaking with a power that is much stronger than anything else in all creation. Amen.