

Lent 3
19/03/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 20:1-17
Ps 19
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
John 2:13-22

The foolishness of God

The Ten Commandments have a long history amongst the people of Israel, and in the church. The structure of the Commandments is significant. The first table deals with our duty towards God, and the second table deals with our duty to our neighbours. These two parts, later summarised by Jesus in the Great Commandments and transformed in the New Commandment, express our worship and our service, or you could say, our Worship and our Mission. Figuratively it is possible to think of the sign of the cross as reflecting these two parts.

The most important part of the Commandments is the introduction to them found in verse 2: *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the land of slavery"*. This makes clear who the God is who wishes these commandments to be kept. This is not God-in-general, whose name is found in many cultures in the world. This is God who identified with Israel's history; the agent and giver of their freedom. We should not underestimate the significance of this. The God of Israel is the one who moves towards the people to relate and liberate. The Commandments are not just another form of bondage to replace Pharaoh's oppression; they are a gift which provides a way of relating to God with reverence which flows into maintaining an attitude of care and respect towards others. The Commandments were meant to express the freedom that came to the people in the name of this God, who was not invented by them, nor came to light out of centuries of speculative reflection. This was God, the living God, who called them to life and created them out of the nothingness of Egyptian slavery. If you watch Doc Martin on the ABC you will know that last night's episode was about how the village of Port Wenn seemed to suffer from a visit by Cupid. His darts of love were being felt everywhere and people suddenly felt themselves being drawn into new relationships. There is a sense in which *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the land of slavery"*... is a dart of love: it declares You are loved, you are set free - live in your freedom.

In connection with the Epistle and Gospel readings there seems to be one Commandment that stands out: *You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord...* This prohibition is designed to protect God's reputation by preventing the divine name from being associated with purposes, which do not mesh with the nature of God. This means much more than saying "Good Lord, why did you do that?" It is more like praying, "in God we trust" while dropping bombs on people. *You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord...* means: **you shall not co-opt God for your own purposes**. To do so is an act both of blasphemy and idolatry. There is here a link with the Gospel. Jesus' zealous cleansing of the Temple is because the place of worship had been co-opted for purposes, which did not reverence God.

Paul, who was no less zealous in letter to the Corinthians, also aimed to clear away some things that were a distraction. Despite the fact that their context included every kind of philosophy and cult, Paul had called a congregation together in that city. But after he left a different spirit began to infect the people. They turned from living by the wisdom of the Gospel he had given them and began to try and measure God by their own standards of wisdom. Paul refers to two: the Greek and the Hebrew. Greeks believed God had to be changeless and immortal, making it impossible to understand God as truly human and capable of suffering as we do. On the other hand the Jews had a tradition in which the Wisdom of God could be personified but they saw it as blasphemous to imagine a man on a cross could be the sign of the presence of the transcendent, ineffable and holy Creator. By their standards such a suggestion would make as much sense as a drama about a boy with a duck would make to someone who knew nothing of Leunig. The Corinthians regarded it as completely unreasonable, offensive and foolish to suggest that the cross of Christ could be the place where God was present. By their reasoning it was much more likely to be a sign of God's absence.

There was a link between the deletion of the cross as the central measuring rod of faith, and the way the Corinthians had taken to squabbling over the precedence of their religious ideas. The Corinthian's had forgotten what it meant to love one another as they had been loved. What was now being allowed to drive life at Corinth was alien to the pattern of God's work and wisdom, as revealed in the cross and resurrection. Paul's statement on the foolishness of God was a powerful antidote, which named as Godless the self-centred and destructive behaviour of the Corinthians. His focus on the Cross made it clear that the life of faith is not **based** on any form of religious or spiritual discourse we have developed or cultivated. The life of faith arises first from God's dart of abiding, self-giving love, which impacts us even when we are not seeking it. Later, we may choose to explain the faith this gives rise to in terms of reason, or philosophy, or some other form of discourse. But faith is seeded by God's free gift to us.

Paul aimed to lead the Corinthians back to a common reference point. He sought to show that in Jesus Christ God acted for us in a way that has taken us further than we have been before - through death and emptiness. Here is a thought, which reveals something new about the character of God and the nature of humanity. But in order to understand the wisdom and power of God we have to let go of our old presuppositions. This does not mean being anti-intellectual or deliberately simple minded. It means being willing to start from an entirely different place - a most unlikely place - a place that by all the established canons of reason seems entirely **unreasonable**. This is especially threatening to all who live with carefully constructed notions of God and it is no accident that amongst Philosophers there is found a strong dislike for Paul. Paul does seem to send scholars and philosophers flying, but he is only opposed to those who have tried to co-opt God to their form of wisdom, leaving out of the picture God as God has become known in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This message about God, Paul says, is made clear not in the eloquent debates of the age, but in the foolishness of proclamation - the words, deeds and worship of the church which continue to show that **what God is, is different from what mortals think**. What God is, is found in the call to freedom voiced in a life of love lived out amongst us. This life endured humiliations to stand with the lowly over against the powerful. This life of enfleshed love is found offering non-violent resistance to political power, and did not seek to dominate or discriminate against others but acted inclusively

towards all. The burden is that, compared with the usual paradigms of human wisdom and power, what the church points to appears to be useless and irrelevant. That is why, for the church, living according to self-giving love is itself a cross. The oddness of this message means that amongst its contemporaries the church seems foolish, or redundant, so that many prefer to persist with their present system of logic, their philosophy of life, or their commitment to some form of esoteric wisdom.

Paul's forthright and disruptive proclamation was to highlight something: God who claims the world for divine purposes speaks to us through humiliation, suffering and death. By this extraordinary means God seeks to liberate us from being trapped in ourselves - human systems of living and being that focus not on God but on what we can know. The knowledge Paul proclaims to us can seem like an invitation to live by wisdom that seems so confining, irrelevant and undercutting it brings only puzzlement, sorrow and darkness. On the other hand it can be like the opening words of the Commandments. A Cupid's arrow - a dart of love that makes our heart sing, because it shows us that before we ask God is for us, and seeks us out to engage us in a relationship of self-giving love.