

Pentecost + 17
1/10/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Esther 7:1 - 6, 9 - 10, 9:20 -22
Psalm 124
James 5:13 - 20
Mark 9:38 - 50

Whoever is not against us is for us...

The Exclusive Brethren have been in the news lately. Their emergence into the public realm has evoked the spectre of sectarianism, something that arises in the church when one part of the body of Christ claims to have exclusive control over a higher or clearer understanding of the truth. This can develop between denominations, such as in the tensions between Protestants and Catholics in the first part of Australian history, and it can arise from movements that develop within denominations, as in the Quakers, who came out of the Church of England. The Quakers have moderated over time; they have become inclusive rather than exclusive, and are accepted as part of the whole church.

A sect is a distinctive and separately organised group of believers who reject the established ecclesiastical authorities while claiming to adhere to the authentic elements of faith, normally based on scriptural or doctrinal premises. Historically sects generally protest against the culture of a church, as did the Quakers. But in modern times they have protested against trends in secular culture, as do the Exclusive Brethren. Their members have adopted a position on certain issues, and seek to influence government policy according to their moral view. Ironically they seem to be opposed to some policies supported by the Greens, who are very moral in their view of the world.

Churches may at times reveal sectarian tendencies, as in the Catholic Church's public attitude towards Eucharistic fellowship with other Christians. But generally a church is inclusive of a population and will allow for mixture and variation in understandings of faith. On the other hand a sect is exclusive and has a much more rigid idea of faith and practice. Allegiance to a sect is always voluntary and you cannot be a member of both a church and a sect. A sect will guard its membership with some rigour, and a person can be excluded or shunned for breaking with norms of faith and practice. Sects usually begin with the intention of creating an ideal Christian community, and often end up being caught out by the same human folly and partiality that afflicts us all.

This distinction between sect and church is well known in the Christian tradition, and the same trends can be found in other faiths. It arises because, in our search for truth, the human thing is to become fixed at some point, when continuing openness is still called for. Becoming fixed is often associated with being in control, and usually reflects a loss of the sort of openness that is born of true humility.

This touches on something that happens in today's episode from the Gospel. There was a charismatic prophet who was exercising a ministry of liberation in keeping with the spirit of Jesus. The disciples tried to stop him because "he was not one of us". He did not belong to the inner circle gathered around Jesus. But compared to their exclusive approach, Jesus is inclusive: *do not stop him ... for whoever is not against us is for us*. There are texts in Matthew and Luke, which say something different to this, but here

Jesus speaks against a sectarian spirit, which limits the power of God to something under our control. To forbid him was to prevent a “little one” and cause a person new in the faith to stumble. To do this was to become flavourless salt, something that had lost its edge and become useless. This action is part of the teaching about the kingdom that follows. Notice how Jesus would prefer to cut off a body part for the sake of entering the kingdom, but he does not suggest cutting off the person doing good deeds in his name. Here is a warning against the arrogance that is unable to recognise that truth may be bigger than we can imagine, and God may have given gifts outside the privileged inner circle, or even outside the church all together. The question is whether we in the church are able to be self-critical and live in such openness and resist setting the limits to suit ourselves. Are we able to accept that signs of the work of God may be found beyond the expected limits of our community life? And in finding this to be so, can we be supportive and grateful for the work of God that goes on outside our control and without our aid.

These points are relevant to the reading from the book of Esther, which has had its detractors. The complaints are that it does not mention God, is narrowly ethnocentric and seems to be a work of fiction, which justifies the establishment of the excessive feast of Purim. And there is an episode of revenge in it that raises some questions. The book was given canonical status because of Esther’s deed of power, which defeated an attempt to commit genocide against the Jewish people. Deeds of power are not violent gestures. They are acts of liberation which bring about change by claiming rights and freedom for oppressed people, in this case a minority group facing persecution. This fictional story can easily be shown to relate to other experiences of deliverance celebrated in Jewish history. At one level the story reflects an age old enmity between the Jews and the Amalakites, represented by Mordecai and Haman. At another level Haman can be seen as a type representing the forces of cruelty and prejudice under which the Jews, and others, have suffered in history. Haman’s fall is a reminder of how the force of life has a way of triumphing over suffering and oppression. Esther did not need to be seen to pray to be accepted as righteous. Her deed of power was the utilisation of her natural gifts, and her position, at the risk of her life, to achieve freedom for her people, an action that is consistent with the justice of God. Esther’s willingness to work for light and life in a context of darkness and death was the sign of her righteousness, and her story compares with that of the five women celebrated in the commemorative sculpture outside.

In his book *Being Human* John de Gruchy tells how in the struggle against apartheid Christians and people of other faith traditions joined hands with all sorts of people to fight injustice and work for liberation until the tide of progress became unstoppable. The same happened in Eastern Europe, bringing Soviet power to an end. It was more restricted but similar in Nazi Germany where Christians and secular men and women formed an alliance in defence of human values against the tyranny. Quoting Bonhoeffer he says: “these very values - reason, culture, humanity, freedom, tolerance - that had previously been used against Christianity, suddenly came ‘very near to the Christian standpoint’.” This rapprochement was not at the expense of Christian conviction. The people who cooperated were not the liberal Protestants, but the members of the Confessing Church who were strongly rejecting of the prevailing culture. They were able to combine over a shared, just and humane vision of life. The same sort of cooperation between people of different faiths and no faith can be seen in our own Asylum Seeker Project.

Whoever is not against us is for us - is a call for working for unity, not for dividing up the body of Christ. If we are faced with having to decide where we stand on an issue, the clue is to see that it is not the use of Jesus' name, but the spirit of that name which is the measure that affects our choice. That is, does what we are concerned with equate with his demonstration of what the Kingdom means, which is measured by service not success. The questions we must ask are these. Is it open to life, and against death? Does it seek to liberate rather than oppress? Will it serve light rather than dark and deathly purposes? Is it inclusive rather than exclusive? Is it humble, remaining open to further insights, or is it arrogant, grandiose and in control? Is it hopeful rather than hopeless? The reason we would ask these questions is because, in the church we live from the revelation that has been gifted to us in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. His witness, which does not come to us from the past but from the future God intends for all people, also demonstrates that God overturns our efforts at power and control. With this in mind, we do not resign from the world, despite the problems we see about us. Instead we are invited to freely engage in actions of hope that anticipate the coming fulfilment of God's reign. And as we do so we do not have to eschew the contribution of others who may hold a different faith, or no faith, and yet care about the world, life and the future as we are bound to do. For as Christians we live from the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, which means for us there is hope, because the story is not over yet.