

Pentecost 12
23/8/2009

Mark the Evangelist

1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

Sermon preached by Rev. Duncan Watson

This sermon was prompted by two things: some weeks ago a sheet was handed out with the proposed furnishings for worship in the hall which at the time was to begin this morning; and from the gospel of John 6 today there is the first part of verse 63 which reads, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless." Here there is at least an apparent contradiction. On the one hand there is a concern about furnishings, about matter or material things, about the flesh; on the other hand we seem to be told that, the flesh, - matter - doesn't matter. The sentence seems to claim that religion, spirituality, faith, are all about the spirit; the flesh, material things or matter, is useless.

When I was thinking about this contrast between the concern about material things such as the furnishing of a place of worship and the assertion that it is the spirit that gives life my thoughts for some reason went back to two churches I came across in Scotland in my post graduate days there. In both cases how things were placed affected how you worshipped or tried to worship. The first church was in the town of Falkirk where I once led worship. Now the communion table and high pulpit were situated on the long side of the church and as you looked out from the pulpit you were confronted not only by the people in the pews along the other side but also by people at both ends of the church so you didn't see the congregation more or less before you. In addition the church had a balcony which stretched along the side of the church and extended on to the ends of the church. Especially when it came to preaching from the pulpit it was difficult to focus on people in the congregation down there or along there so I finished up preaching to the clock which was placed on the balcony opposite me. Of course worship could still go ahead but from my point of view and I suspect from that of at least some members of the congregation this arrangement was not ideal for worship. The other church, as I recall, was in Kirkcaldy in Fife. This was a church in the round built not long after the Reformation. The idea had a point, to emphasise the people as a community, and instead of staring at the minister they could see each other. However, at least some of the congregation would have to view the minister's back and some would not be able to see what was happening in the Lord's Supper, not wholly satisfactory outcomes.

Now on the basis of these sentences, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless" some religious people would say that my concerns were baseless because after all religion is all about the spirit, not material things. Such people would seek their god in a flight to heaven, or deep within themselves, and quite frequently they would be relatively indifferent to a Christian community of flesh and blood. Now an interesting thing about this sentence from John, as Lesslie Newbigin has suggested, is that such a spiritual religion is possibly what Jesus means by the flesh when he says "the flesh is useless". This type of spirituality or flesh is useless, as we learn from this chapter six of John and indeed from the whole of John, because it moves out from itself. The human being is the defining centre, but *Jesus* is insisting that life or faith is not attained from my human side of things but is simply a gift of God. As Jesus says towards the end of

the reading today, "I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." And this coming to Jesus is a gift, as John chapter six has been making clear, which has made itself present and effective *through the very flesh and blood* of Jesus himself, that is, through his concrete humanity - all as the gift of the Father. But there are those who judge this flesh and blood Jesus as a scandal or foolishness and reject him; there are those who seek god in their own spirituality, but both according to John are of the flesh because it is from the "flesh", from the human point of view, that they judge and act.

Where do we go from here? Now there are some commentators who would understand this chapter six of John as some sort of meditation on the Lord's Supper and there can be no doubt that John assumes and knows that sacrament but I doubt whether you can call this chapter a meditation on the Lord's Supper because, as Newbiggin has again reminded me, "Neither word nor sacrament is a means by which people can secure the life of heaven for themselves." To try to do that, in John's terms, is to be of the flesh. It is the wrong way around. Rather, here sacramental words, thoughts and acts are being used to point away from themselves to the giver of life, the crucified and risen Christ.

Now, whatever we may make of that there is one thing that can be said and it is this: the Gospel of John is not against the flesh at all. Rather the very opposite is the case for at the very beginning of John we have the famous sentence, "the Word became flesh and lived among us" and all through this chapter six Jesus is speaking of the necessity of his flesh and blood, of the necessity of his concrete humanity and all that goes with it, to bring the life of God to the world. By extension that implies the centrality of the material things of this world and of human community in our life with God. It was for this reason that Archbishop William Temple claimed that Christianity was "the most materialist of religions."

So how do we understand this paradox that the flesh is useless and yet the material, the fleshly, is necessary? To begin an answer and to sum up I recall one of those comments which stick in your mind. Somewhere in the writings of Rudolf Bultmann I came upon words to this effect: "The way to faith is not our way to God, but God's way to us" - "the Word became flesh." And that I think is what John is telling us particularly in chapter six when he writes, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless." It is what Jesus says in chapter three when he says "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." It is through Jesus alone, the Jesus of flesh and blood, that God gives spirit and life. And, depending on his promise that he will be with us, furnishings of the church, the liturgy, its music, and the place of the Christian community, of you and me, find their place. We are *responding* to God's gift of life in Christ and essentially that response is the response of thanksgiving. Indeed, as you have no doubt often been reminded, at the centre of the Lord's Supper is the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, Eucharist. Moreover, in the liturgy of Word and Sacrament we find the beginning and the bedrock of our lives of faith which basically are a thanksgiving to God. All we do in worship, in community, in deeds of justice and mercy, are in thankful response and service to him who has given us everything.

And in this light we may give our all. Here, I recall another comment which I heard years ago. When I was doing my bachelor of divinity at Princeton Theological Seminary, in each of the three years you had to preach a trial sermon before your class in the presence of the professor of homiletics and a lecturer in speech; indeed a trial it was. I was of the opinion then, and in general I still am of the opinion, that the substance of the sermon is more important than the presentation. Now, after the third year sermon

we had to discuss it with Professor Beeners, the director of speech, of whom I stood in some terror. He knew that I believed theology was important and he agreed with that, but then he made that comment I remember: "If you have something worth saying in your sermon, surely it is your responsibility to say it as well as you can." That is absolutely right. Perhaps I am not a great credit to the Princeton speech department but when I preach I do try to be true to what Professor Beeners said. And of course he does not stand alone. After all the author of the letter to the Ephesians exhorts us "to put on the whole armour of God" in what might be described as an "up and at 'im" passage, and the other day I came upon this quotation from Martin Luther which I thought was apposite: "We have a saying: "God gives every good thing, but not just by waving a wand." God gives all good gifts, but you must lend a hand and take the bull by the horn; that is, you must work and give God good cause and a mask" and by a mask Luther meant that God works hidden under the masks of men and women of faith.

So in worship, in the liturgy which I am also sure you have been told means service, as in the furnishings you must take the bull by the horns and work in the service of him whose words, as the gospel of John informs us, are spirit and life. It will be a service of freedom because you don't have to save the world - or yourself. It will be a service of freedom because you don't have to get it all right with t's crossed and i's dotted but you will simply do what you can. And then by God's grace our worship will enable people to say with the psalmist, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts". May they and we come with expectancy and hope, rather than with a lack of expectancy or even with dread. Then beginning in worship you continue to serve in that life of self-surrender of which Jesus is the exemplar and foundation. And that life, as John will tell us, is expressed in our love for one another which Jesus has commanded us to do, and as he sends us with his love into the world as the Father sent him to us.