

Epiphany 5
8/2/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalm 147

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

All things to all people

Our rights – as citizens, as individuals, as human beings – have been much in view over the last few years. Against governments responsible for limiting the behaviour of a few, the many wonder whether their own rights are also being unnecessarily limited. Against the forces of globalisation, big business and the greed of the developed world there is a growing concern for the rights of the “two-thirds” world which lags behind us in so many ways. Against the memory of a time when we were defined by our past, our gender, our race, our age, our religion or any other thing inflicted on us by fate, today we strongly assert our “rights”, our freedoms from all which might make a claim somehow to limit us.

At the same time, with increasing regularity, there is also talk heard about responsibilities although, over against the *urgency* of the talk about rights, talk about responsibilities seems to have a weariness or an irony about it. Once it was the other way around, but today responsibility is on the back foot and has to defend itself against right. Rights tend to win over responsibilities because it is part of our lot that my “right” to exist or prosper or be secure will eventually come into conflict with yours. When it does there enters another principle, “might is right”, and the conflict is intensified. Even so, if in practice one seems to have precedence over another, in our better moments we still seek to balance the two: rights imply responsibilities, and vice-versa.

The fundamental *nature* of talk about rights and responsibilities is *legal*. The attempt to balance my rights with yours – my rights with my responsibilities – takes on the character of a transaction, a social “contract” in which certain things are required of me, and certain other things guaranteed to me. Contracts reflect an economy of *exchange*. My responsibilities serve your rights; your rights imply corresponding responsibilities: balance *without excess*.

And this brings us to Paul, the apostle of excess.

Paul says of his preaching: “If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me *no* ground for boasting, for an *obligation* is laid on me, and woe to me if I do *not* proclaim the gospel!!” (9.16). That is, there is no freedom here. There is an obligation or responsibility laid on him by God for the benefit of others. This responsibility, however, is to be met by the responsibility of his hearers to provide him a living. We might say that the congregation has the “right” (in a qualified sense) to hear the gospel, and it’s Paul’s responsibility to meet that right. Conversely, Paul has a right to eat, and it is his hearers’ responsibility to meet that right.

This is all well and good. Even if we think that hearing the gospel is no desirable thing, we know the logic of exchange and can follow Paul’s argument to this point. Yet Paul is *not* really interested in spelling out how the rights and responsibilities of preachers and their audience should be balanced. Rights and responsibilities are natural components of human existence, and not the content of the Christian ethic Paul goes on to describe.

Christian existence does involve rights and responsibilities, but you don't need to be a Christian to assent to them. If this were all Paul has to say to us, then the gospel is simply a particular flavour of law. It's Jesus-flavoured law, but merely law nonetheless.

Paul is under obligation to God and to the world to preach, and he does. The crucial point, though, is that although he has this responsibility *and* the corresponding right to claim an income, he does *not* claim money for his work. While he speaks of rights and related responsibilities, he points beyond these merely legal, contractual requirements to the possibility of *good* news: news which is not legally necessary but surprising and liberating. For the good news is concerned not with what is *due*, but with *over*-payment, with what is in *excess* of what is due, with the delivery of *more* than is legally required.

In the first instance, this means for Paul the exercise of ministry without claiming the payment it is his right to claim. But he opens the issue right up with the language of freedom and slavery which is so much a part of his way of thinking about the gospel.

Although free in the gospel to claim his rights from others, instead he denies himself these rights and so makes himself subject to those to whom he ministers: to the Jews he is as a Jew; to the Gentiles, he is as a Gentile; to those under or outside the law, he becomes as one under or outside the law. God has embraced Paul as he is and sent him with a commission to preach as he is, and so Paul can rightly expect of others that they accept him as he is. Yet, for the sake of the gospel Paul becomes as *they* are, that there may be as few obstacles as possible preventing them from receiving the gospel.

Yet, we have to push still further than this. He is not simply being helpful or accommodating here. Paul turns his way of relating to others into the gospel itself. In another place he exhorts his readers: be as Jesus was, who, although he possessed all the rights of God, did not think them things to cling to but set them aside, taking on the form of a servant, humbling himself to the point of losing himself – even through the cross (Philippians 2).

This Paul does himself. He does not merely speak of what God has done in Christ, as if it were some piece of historical information to be delivered to the ignorant. God's work shapes the way Paul himself works. Becoming all things to all people is not a missionary *strategy*, although we quickly turn it into that. The point is not that evangelism works best if we become like those we seek to evangelise. The point is that *evangelism is excessive service*, responsibility which does not claim its right. Evangelism then becomes not the presentation of information, but the very expression and embodiment of the gospel itself – *a giving of self in excess of what might justly be required*. The message becomes the medium.

In his closing remark in our passage this morning, there is one final point Paul lets us in on: "I do all this on account of the gospel, *so that I may share in its blessings...*" (v.23). "*I do this*, so that I may share in the blessings of the gospel..." Not only does Paul embody, or realize, the gospel in the way in which he relates to those who have a "right" to hear the gospel. Paul also experiences the gospel *himself* through his excessive and unbalanced service to them.

There are clues here for churches like ours. Our Synod's Major Strategic Review springs from a concern for sustainability, realised through strategy. Yet sustainability is an ecological concept, ecology being a profoundly "legal" (here: natural law) space of predetermined cause and effect. Strategy is a military concept, again the realm of cause and effect: bigger guns, cleverer plans and sneakier commandos win the day. Strategy unto sustainability is a commitment to balance and not to the excess of the gospel. It

assumes that we already “have” the gospel, and that the question at hand is one of delivery; for Paul, the delivery itself is the possibility of further experience of the gospel.

But this is not just “their” problem: we too, as a congregation, have to resolve how to move into the future: what to do with the enormous resources at our disposal. None of what I have said pre-determines what we decide because gospel excess is not a natural, legal – determined – category: it is an historical one, a question of decision, a casting of ourselves in trust in the one who looks and waits to see what we will choose, and promises to work with *that*. While we might – perhaps even must – be as clever and careful as we can as we make these plans, we need to be aware that in fact we are more “forcing” God’s hand, so to speak, than reading it. This would be an appalling thing to say were it not that this God can take our worst excesses – even crucifying the Lord of life – and make of them something life-giving.

The empty economy of right and responsibility cannot bring us life, but only a precarious balance and, with it, anxiety. The good news about Jesus tells instead of an excess of love which is undeserved, but nevertheless is pressed down and flows over through his disciples into a cascade of hope.

Paul finds himself caught up in the whirlpool of the gospel. Having been drawn into the current, he uses its force and power as the means of reaching others, and yet that same force again swirls *him* around, shifting, buffeting, cleansing and empowering for more such work. This is our calling, and the promise which carries it to us.

May God’s people ever continue to hear the call and trust the promise, for their own sake and for the sake of those who do not yet know themselves to be daughters and sons of this God and Father, sisters and brothers of this Christ, women and men sustained by this Spirit. Amen.
