

Good Friday
3/4/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:13-53:6

Psalm 40

John 12:20-33

The cross as throne

Many of you will know the ancient Greek myth of Oedipus. It has come down to us in a number of versions, but generally runs something like this: Oedipus is born to the king and queen of Thebes. A prophecy is spoken over Oedipus, that he will kill his father and marry his mother. To thwart this, the child is left out to die but is found and is adopted by the king and queen of Corinth. Once grown up, Oedipus accidentally finds his way back to Thebes where he kills his birth-father in what was perhaps the world's first road rage incident. Oedipus does not know that it is the king or his father, and no one else knows who killed the king. Oedipus then rids the city of an ongoing burden and threat, and receives as reward the hand of the widowed queen – his birth-mother – in marriage, who bears him a number of children. Eventually, however, everyone discovers the unwitting patricide and incest. Oedipus' mother hangs herself, and Oedipus gouges out his own eyes and is exiled with the children (half-siblings) he had by his mother-wife.

It's a story with something for all the family! For the Greeks it was about the unavoidability of fate, and modern depth psychology has made much of it in relation to family dynamics, but the important part of the myth for our purposes this morning is, first, that Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother *not knowing* who they were and, second, when these things are discovered to have taken place, the whole story is revealed as a tragedy: death and destruction and exile are all that can follow.

Of course, the death we gather to recall today is the death of Jesus. Yet I suspect that this death is heard by many to be a tragedy along the lines of Oedipus: the irony that Jesus was king of Israel, and yet Israel unknowingly crucified its king. Certainly the church often "sells" the story in this way. I want this morning to unpack a different sense of what happens in the death of Jesus, and why we gather for no mere tragic or ironic memorial but for "Good" Friday.

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus speaks of his approaching crucifixion as a "lifting up": "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (v.32; cf. John 3.14f; 8.28). It's easy to hear this as a euphemism – a way of referring to the impending disaster of the crucifixion without actually naming it for what it is, a way of softening the blow for Jesus' hearers.

Yet there is much more going on here than mere euphemism. The evangelist John loves double meanings and the ironies which come with them. The Greek word behind "lifted up" can certainly apply to being lifted up on a cross. At the same time, it can just as naturally be used for that kind of elevation which is an *enthronement*. A king's coronation could be said to be his "lifting up". This double meaning is suggested again later in the gospel when Pilate nails to the cross the charge against Jesus: "the king of the Jews" (19.19-22). Here is another of John's ironies – and he intends us to note and to understand them. Pilate seeks to mock Jesus, or mock the Jews, yet in the evangelist's mind Pilate unknowingly declares to all the world Jesus' true identity.

We miss the point, however, if we read this as simply telling us that Israel unknowingly crucified its king in the same kind of way that Oedipus unwittingly killed his dad and married his mum. In the crucifixion it is not so much that a king is killed in tragic and ironic circumstances but rather that a king is created, or a particular *kingdom* comes into being. The ambiguity of “lifted up” allows John to present Jesus to us as *both* being crucified *and* enthroned, being crucified and being made king, *in* this “lifting up” in the crucifixion. Not a king *mistakenly or unknowingly* crucified, Jesus is the king *because* he is crucified, he *becomes* king in his very being crucified. His kingship takes its character not from what he should have been recognized to be before the crucifixion but from the fact that he has been crucified. It is as if the Son of God is not the Son of God *for us*, not *our* king, *until* he is crucified. Why? Because we are those who would crucify our king (cf. John 19.5), such that only a crucified king – a crucified God – could be *our* king, *our* God.

So it is that, for John’s gospel, the crucifixion is much less of a catastrophe than it is for the other gospels. For the crucifixion is the point at which the nature of God as *faithfulness* is laid forth for all to see: here the full extent of God’s reign – God’s kingship – is revealed. This is a kingship not abstractly over “all”, but specifically over those who crucify Jesus. Jesus is only king to those who would crucify him. (We approach again themes visited [a few weeks ago](#) [March 15]).

Just to reinforce this point, we should note one other way Jesus refers to the crucifixion in this morning’s first reading: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be *glorified*” (v.23). The language of “glorification” here applies also to the cross, as it does elsewhere in John (cf. 12.16; 13.31f; 17.7). The glory of Christ is seen *in the crucifixion*. The glory is not the *resurrection* if that is understood as an event separate from the cross. In the crucifixion we see something about the nature of God which the resurrection by itself cannot show: a vision of God in which God’s very being – God’s very glory – is tied up with his relationship to a people which falls short of his covenant call. God’s tying of himself to his broken world goes to the very heart of what God can be, and must become; this God, this king, bears the marks of crucifixion, because we – the crucifiers – are his “subjects”.

[ASIDE: John would say to us, then, not merely that “God is love” or that “God so loved the world”, if by that is meant that God could otherwise stand aloof but in fact condescends to forgive. Rather, God is as God loves. God is the way in which he loves. This forces our language and our thinking to a strange place because a “thing”, God, becomes an action, love. It is as if a singer were to become the song. We have to say, then, not that God is “love”, as if these were two separate things we simply join together, but that the love of God is God – how God loves is itself God. Jesus upon the cross is truly Word-become-flesh, God meeting us at our lowest yet – and this is the critical point – remaining, even “becoming” God in that meeting.]

To put it differently, we might say that the gospel is the impossible proclamation that the greater the distance we place between ourselves and God, the more strained our relationship is with God, the more clearly we see God’s freedom to be God for us through all obstacles, even such a death as the cross. It is as if God becomes more “God” as we become less godly, as God overcomes the distance – overcomes the cross – that he might again be life and love for us.

Here we move within the theme of the faithfulness of God. God's faithfulness takes its meaning from God's response to the unfaithfulness of God's people. That God is faithful, and that this faithfulness concerns keeping a promise of good things for God's people, is at the heart of the biblical witness. That Jesus can be both crucified and enthroned in a single act is the meeting of our unfaithfulness with God's faithfulness.

The God with whom the church deals is always the crucified God, because the church is composed of those who crucify, even God. And yet because God still wills to be our God, the crucifixion becomes an enthronement: the kingdom of the crucified God is a kingdom over crucifiers.

This is good news. We are those who lift Jesus up upon the cross, but not with the tragic consequences of Oedipus: exile in horror unto death. For the death of Jesus is as much God's act as ours: the enthronement of Jesus as king over those who crucified him, that we might not be lost; even with *that* as part of our history, we remain his.

We cannot fall outside of God's desire to be God for us, to heal and to restore *even us*. In the crucifixion we are named and judged, and forgiven and owned. And so we remember not the tragic fate of a good man, but a goodness which subverts and overcomes the ironies and tragedies of human existence: the very faithfulness of God who will not let us go.

And so, we call this not Tragic Friday, as if it were the symbol of human weakness and the dark necessities of fate. It is Good Friday because, unlike what *was* tragically inevitable for Oedipus and his family, here the tragic is swallowed up. Any choice we might make for death in our lives or in others' is put behind us in the one death which really matters: the death in which death ceases to be only our end and becomes a new beginning in a relationship to a new kind of king, a new kind of God.

For this surprising, life-giving end to the tragic human story, all thanks and praise be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and always, Amen.
