

Pentecost
17/5/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 104

John 15:26-16:15

The Spirit of the unbearable church

Jesus says to his disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

What are these "unbearable" things? The text is not explicit, and the neither do the commentaries seem to be very interested in the question either.

Why might this be an important question? It seems important to me at least because there is much today which the church finds "unbearable": Decline in numbers, deteriorating, outdated unmanageable buildings, a much bruised reputation, the cause and effects of Uniting our Future, increasing exposure to risk in an increasingly litigious society, increasingly complex governance responsibilities. The Synod's Major Strategic Review springs from the sense that these things cannot or should not, be borne further: they are "unbearable".

These unbearable things being part of our common life as church here and now, what is the relationship between them and the things Jesus considers his disciples will not be able to bear? And how does the Spirit make such things bearable?

The nature of the unbearable things Jesus speaks of here becomes a little clearer when he refers to the work of the Spirit. Many things are said about the work of the Spirit in John, and we tend to pick and choose a bit between these things. John 3 gives us the Spirit which "blows where it wills". This is the Spirit of a Major Strategic Review: open the windows, let the gale of the Spirit blow everything around; *change*. Then there is the Spirit of John 7, which bubbles and gurgles, springing up to do watery things for parched people. This is the Spirit for the weary minister or the jaded congregation. And then there is the Spirit of John 14-16 who "comforts", advocates, defends: the Spirit for a church feeling under siege.

Towards the end of our text this morning, however, we heard of another Spirit – although, of course, they are all the same Spirit. This is the Spirit who "convicts", who "proves the world wrong" about sin, righteousness and judgement. This is the least "spiritual" of the Holy Spirits we might choose to emphasise, at least so far as the popular contemporary interest in "spirituality" goes. This is a *spikey* Spirit that does not waft or flow or comfort but *skewers* us with the pointy end of sin, righteousness and judgement.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." They cannot bear them "now" because the Spirit has not yet been given. The Spirit has not been given because Jesus has not yet been crucified. The truth about sin, righteousness and judgement will not be revealed until the crucifixion, and it is the Spirit which will reveal this and make it bearable, the Spirit who comes after the crucifixion and resurrection – in John's case *straight* after them. The crucifixion becomes unbearable not because it was the loss of a loved one but because the Spirit reveals the cross to be a judgement *on our* judgement about what is sinful, about what righteousness looks like, about their capacity to make the right judgement. For, in its first movement, the crucifixion is a

pious act, the worshipful exclusion of a heretic. Jesus tells them of their own future ordeals, and also of his own: “An hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God”.

The truth which the Spirit will tell about Jesus is a reinterpretation of the cross. And that interpretation is this: that the cross is for “the world” – including here, the synagogue, the church – the sign that *Jesus himself* is the unbearable thing: sinful, unrighteous, worthy of a judgement of guilty.

Jesus himself – that Jesus might truly be the Christ – is the unbearable thing, the contradictory, wrong thing. What the Spirit does in convicting the world – including the disciples and the church – about sin, righteousness and judgement is *make Jesus bearable*. The Spirit, then, does not deliver “a truth” about Jesus – a proposition or a doctrine; the Spirit *truths* Jesus to us, *seals* this Jesus to us. The Spirit causes us to see where we have been blind: to see that God’s way in the world is very, very strange indeed.

But it gets stranger still when we get back to why we asked about these unbearable things in the first place. What *is* the relationship between the unbearability of Jesus, and the unbearable church – the church even we, let alone “the world”, can scarcely bear? And if the Spirit helps with respect to the unbearability of Jesus, how does the Spirit help us with the unbearability of the church?

The unbearability of Jesus, the unbearability of the church and the work of the Spirit are bound up in this way: the Spirit points to the unbearable truth in Jesus by *creating* the unbearable church.

The truth about Jesus which the Spirit brings is not doctrinal fact; it is a truth which changes things. Jesus is crucified because he doesn’t *look* right, because he clearly cannot be true; the Word cannot become flesh in *that* way. And so the claims he makes must be sinful, unrighteous and rightly condemned.

Over against this the Spirit teaches the truth about Jesus, but it does so not by simply *contradicting* our condemnation of Jesus with a “No”. The Spirit tells the truth about Jesus by *doing the Jesus again*: now as the church – the unbearable church. The proof of the righteousness of the unbearable Jesus is the unbearable church.

When we condemn the church for its heresy or dogmatism or managerialism or incompetence or corporatism or wishy-washiness, or for its wealth or anxiety or triumphalism or self-interest or lack of faith, or whatever, we declare: surely *this* cannot bear the Word of God, be the presence of God, be even useful to God. Surely there is more of God somewhere *else*. This is the presumption and the engine of modern, popular nowhere-in-particular spirituality: that, of all places, the Spirit cannot be found *here*.

But the gift of the Spirit – the gift of *this* particular Spirit – is the gift of extraordinary ordinary. This is the truth the Spirit brings: here, now in the church – even this church! – is the presence, or the promise, or the possibility of “heaven”, which we declare not because what of we *see* but because of *who* chooses to name this place in that way.

It matters not whether the same might be said of other places. It matters for us only that *this* place – our place – is claimed by God as God’s own, embraced as if an Only-Begotten Child.

This is the gospel – that, even we as are, God wills to have us.

And out of this springs the imperative: love the church. Love the church not as an *idea* but as it *is*. *Love* your congregation; love not only the one you're happy to sit next to, but the one who sits in front of you, or behind. Love your presbytery. Love your church council. Love your Synod. Do this not because they are lovely, *yet*. Any of these can sometimes be quite unbearable, entirely unlovely.

Love because it is the love which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things which *makes* the beloved lovely.

This is God's way with us; by the power of the Spirit God sends, let it be our way with each other. Amen.
