

Sunday 18
2/8/2015

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 7:1-17

Psalm 89

John 12:12-19

Let's make a deal

A couple of months back I sat in on a short course in the city. It was a philosophy subject: "Free Will and Morality". I was interested to see what a philosopher would do with those topics, and also whether something constructive could be said (and heard) in such a space from a gospel perspective, which I wanted to bring! I hope that the answer to the latter was found to be "Yes", because the philosophical treatment of the topic was a little exasperating!

One thing we spent a lot of time on was "determinism" – whether or not our lives and worlds have been determined for us before we make decisions about them. Another key consideration was moral objectivism: whether there are basic moral rules which must be observed, and where these come from. Fundamentally, these are questions about human freedom in relation to "the big picture": the awareness that some things are not free to be changed, and yet that this awareness is in tension with our *thinking* ourselves to be free, or thinking that we *ought* to be free.

Inevitably, God gets invoked in all this. Or, at least, a *kind* of god is invoked. This god is just enough to serve as a possible basis of an already unsupportable proposition. And because the proposition is already unsupportable, its little god becomes representative of the uselessness of gods in general when it comes to talking about anything which matters!

An empty idea of god, however, doesn't make the problem go away. Fundamentally the question remains: are there "set" things about how the world works, which we must observe if we are to prosper in every sense of the word? If there are such set things, are we free to choose them? And what if we don't? Whenever we wonder What is the "right" thing to do?, whenever we pray for guidance, whenever we encourage each other in one direction and admonish for a choice in the "wrong" direction, we imply that something is set – pre-determined – for us. And happiness is a matter of discovering what that is. In all of this, if we are believers, we imagine God to be a kind of still-point – the thing which does not move or change. God does not change, the Good is fixed, and we are to conform to that changelessness by discovering the Good.

To my mind, the philosophy got us nowhere, and Scripture does it all better.

Our reading this morning is about a "deal" struck between David and God. It is an unexpected deal. David has proposed that he will build for God at a temple. God's response is No; this will be the responsibility of another. Rather, God proposes that he will build a house for David. David's name will be made great and the people of Israel will be planted securely in their own place and find peace from their enemies. David is promised that when his days are fulfilled he will lie with his ancestors, having left behind offspring whose own reign will also be established by God. David will be as a son to God as a father, and God's steadfast love will be never taken from David: his throne "shall be established forever" (v.16). This "deal" or, in biblical language "covenant", is one of the central turning points of the Old Testament's account of God's

dealing with the people of Israel. (Strictly speaking, the word "covenant" doesn't appear in this passage, but later scriptural expositions of it – 2 Samuel 23.5; Psalm 89.35; Psalm 132.12 – see this event as establishment of a covenant with David and his line.)

Deals are generally if-then arrangements: if you do this, I'll do that. Yet the most striking characteristic of this covenant is that it is unconditional. One commentator likens what God offers here to the writing of a "blank cheque" (W. Brueggemann). God here promises David a future which is not dependent upon what David or his descendants do. It is an extraordinary promise, particularly given the way in which previous covenants between God and the people have been set up in such a way that the fulfilment of the promises *are* conditional upon what the people do in response to the covenant. We will see as the story unfolds further that the demands of the law of God still cannot be overlooked. But what is now implicit in the relationship between God and his people – the people being signified by the King – is that where failure occurs it becomes the responsibility of *God* to overcome the failure, if it is truly to be the case that God's promise to David and his line can be kept.

This is rather a dangerous proposal. It is easy to imagine the onset of a moral complacency in a covenant like this, the abandonment of any moral objectivity. And yet such complacency is not part of what is promised here, nor part of what actually unfolds.

We should also keep in mind that these stories have been pulled together into their current form by religious leaders of Israel during the time of the Babylonian exile. That is, they are written from the perspective of the punishment of Israel and its kings for long-term failure before God. The significance of any punishment, then, is not diminished. But it is the very context of punishment in exile which makes so important the promise to David of an eternal kingship. For this becomes the basis of hope for Israel in exile. The promise of God to the house of David could become the basis of hope for Israel-in-exile in a way in which the covenant from Sinai could not. What David hears is the promise of faithfulness on God's part regardless of what happens on the part of David and the house of Israel – even that which, in the end, resulted in the loss of the land and the temple.

Unfaithfulness on the part of David and his descendants will meet with the personal or individual loss of the benefits of the kingship, but the long-term promise to the line as a whole, and to Israel through it, will remain in place.

Though they will be punished for extreme failures, they will turn to the promises which are made to David and look towards the fulfilment of those promises in a re-establishment of the line of Davidic Kings. And so, for example, the prophet Isaiah speaks of a "shoot from the stump of Jesse",¹ or the prophet Jeremiah speaks of God's raising up for David a righteous Branch, who "shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."² The relationship is retained – which is the work of God's faithfulness – but it will now have a new shape – as a work of forgiveness, the restoration of those who were in exile.

¹ Isaiah 11.1.

² Jeremiah 23:5-6.

The important thing here is not the risk that we might get it all wrong but the way in which God is, in a sense, intensifying his investment in the world, his association with the world. “Whatever you do, I will stick by you”, is basically what God offers here. There can now be no backing away from the world, if indeed it is the case that God will remain faithful to his promise to David.

This also means, perhaps surprisingly, that there enters here the possibility of “change” in God. For if it is the case that David is trusted by God – by which we mean that he is given his freedom – then there is a sense in which David and the community he represents *take the lead* in determining what actual shape the relationship will take. That the relationship stays in place is *God’s* work; what *shape* it takes, is the work of God’s human creatures.

This dynamic takes final takes definitive form in what happens when, more than 500 years after the exile and 950 years after David, Jesus arrives in an Israel which labours under foreign rule. Here, again – precisely because the world is not as it should be, in that there is no “David” to be seen – the royal language of “Christ” and “son of God” is part of the political and religious atmosphere. Israel continues to look to the promised faithfulness of God expressed in the covenant with David, awaiting the restoration of the throne of David. And so when Jesus begins to look like somebody very special in their midst, he is quite naturally interpreted in those terms, as the words of the people on Palm Sunday show:

‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— the King of Israel!’ ... ‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming...!’
(John 12.13,15)

For indeed, in his own way, Jesus can be interpreted as God’s faithfulness to what was promised to David. Here the identity of Israel is focussed once more in the figure of a “king” although not sufficiently like the kings before, which is why Jesus ends up dying on the cross. The crucifixion is God’s people missing the point, once again. Once more we set an agenda, reshape the basis of the relationship between ourselves and God. And God’s response is both to honour that reshaping – to take seriously our free hand, *even if it slays God’s Christ* – and at the same time to turn such misguided work into its opposite: the basis not of a reciprocated rejection but of a renewed relationship with God. And so, as we symbolise in our gathering around the communion table today, our disastrous efforts in the world are made the basis of our relationship to God: *we* have determined the *shape* of the relationship in the breaking of a body and the spilling of blood, and *God* makes sure that it *remains* a relationship.

Last week the readings suggested the metaphor of a dance as a way of speaking about both human existence and divine existence. It is a metaphor which can be extended also to the relationship *between* God and his human creatures. In the promises to Israel through David God has chosen his partner, and intends to stick with her, for all her left-footedness. For *this* God, his people’s being unable to dance doesn’t make the relationship impossible. It just changes what the dance actually is, God falling into step with us, always keeping his feet out from under ours, correcting for rhythm and direction, leading as he follows our lead.

The good news of the gospel is that even the disaster of the crucifixion of Jesus cannot stand between God and his people. Here our lead is one of rebellion and rejection. God’s lead is to take our very rejection of his faithfulness to what was promised to David and hoped for ever after, and to make of that rejection the sign of just how far he will go to be faithful.

The shape we give to our relationship to God has its sign in those marks of our rejection of God – the body and blood of Jesus. In his unfathomable faithfulness, God makes of those marks a sign of his inexhaustible grace, returning them to us as that by which we are to be nourished and bound together: here are the signs of your poverty, returned to you as signs of my grace. God can promise to David what he does not because David, his descendants and his people are necessarily capable of *getting* their part right, but because God intends to *set* their part right, whatever happens, whatever it takes.

This places us, and God, beyond the simplistic realms of free will and ethics. In the promise to Israel in David, fulfilled in Israel in Jesus, we are promised that we will be his forever, because God is free – free to be God not merely of what we ought to have been but of what we become.

And so the church prays now as it always has:

‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!’

For to bless this one is, in all times, places and circumstances, to be blessed ourselves.
