

Sunday 21
23/8/2015

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 18 Selected verses

Psalm 130

John 1:1-14

Between the messiahs

Over the last decade or so most people who like to take photographs have disposed of their old film-based cameras and replaced them with smaller and cheaper digital cameras, or simply with their telephone. These cameras can take thousands of photographs for almost nothing, so that no one needs to worry about waiting for the shot to be just right. All you need to do is just keep taking photographs in expectation that at least a few of them will be okay.

For the most part, however, most people tend to save not just good photographs but all of them. Again, this is because it is cheap and easy to do so. The result is computers loaded with more photographs that anyone is ever likely to want to look at, but this is no problem. For us today information is easy to obtain, to store and to share, and photographs are just a kind of information. We might not necessarily be any better than our predecessors at *responding* appropriately to all that information, but there is no question that we live in an information age. The *detail* we can record about the world around us is increasing exponentially, even if our capacity to process that information effectively is not.

By contrast, consider what it took to record information in Babylon in the sixth century before Jesus. This is when the Old Testament as we now know it was being pulled together and the stories of David and his successors were being edited into the form that we now have them. Whereas today I could replicate this sermon 1 million times with a few clicks of a mouse button, then it would have taken days or weeks to write out a scroll containing a single copy of the story of David.

This being the case, the question I want to reflect upon this morning is this: why bother with all the detail we have about the life of David? For the detail abounds.

We have skipped over a lot of the story in the space between our treatment of David and Bathsheba and the story we have heard today of the death of David's son Absalom. Absalom's sister Tamar was raped by their half-brother Amnon. Knowing this, David nevertheless refused to act against Amnon. Eventually, Absalom kills Amnon. As a result of this Absalom flees into exile, later to be reconciled to David. Absalom, however, has high political ambitions, and campaigns to replace David as king. David is forced to flee Jerusalem. Absalom pursues David but, despite David's insistence that he not be hurt, the young man is killed by Joab, as we heard in our reading this morning. In the midst of all this there are defections and spies, emotions and suicide – all the makings of a great TV series.

Whatever judgement we might make about all that, I am more interested in the question, Why even tell the story? Why do we need to know the “days of our lives” of these 10th century BC Israelites? Of course, we can moralise happily about this or that event in the story. But if that was the intention of the writers themselves, then perhaps they might have given us a bit more of their own moralising because there isn't very much of it.

Why, when it was so difficult to record and reproduce this information, risk leaving it to readers to work out the moral of the story for themselves?

The reason for the detail would seem to have something to do with the very humanity of the story. We might imagine those early editors looking at all the material they have in front of them, ranging from the innocence of David as a young shepherd and his courage in fronting up to Goliath, to his murder of Uriah and his loss of strength and sense in the face of Absalom – looking at all this and simply wondering how it could all be so.

And so they write it *all* down, or enough of it to make the point. Here is the breadth and length, the height and depth, of the life of any one of us. Even though the story has comparatively little detail compared to a story we might tell about ourselves today, in a context where recording and storing information was so expensive the story displays an extraordinary interest in the details of human relationships and the impact of those details upon those people themselves. That David is the king makes the story all the more compelling because, as we have noted a number of times before, David serves here not simply as one man among the billions of men and women who have lived before and since but as a representative sample. “Here is the human being,” to recall the words of Pilate we heard last week.

When we come then to speak of God’s dealings with us, we must remember that it is with this kind of humanity that God engages. When we declare with John’s gospel that “the Word became flesh” it is precisely *this* flesh, this complex ethical and political confusion which was the ancient, and is the modern, world.

For the most part, however, we prefer either to *oversimplify* the complexity of the problems which we are, or to *distract* from them. Comfort food, shopping till you drop or the extra-marital affair are all distractions from the unbearable heaviness of being – from being and living just where we actually are. “Stop the boats”, a woman’s “right to choose” or imagining that marriage can be whatever we define it to be in this particular moment are unthinking oversimplifications of deep and complex human realities.

In such things, not only do we misrepresent ourselves in whatever fudging of the details might suit us. God is also simplified as we seek to simplify ourselves. It should not surprise us that, if we do not take ourselves as we actually are very seriously then, in the end, we will also not take God very seriously.

But even if oversimplification serves us nicely in distracting us from those less than pleasant details which are our reality, this doesn’t work for God. God will consider us without reduction, without covering over. There are no fig leaves adequate to shielding us from the God who already knows what we look like uncovered.

This is not necessarily good news. We oversimplify and distract ourselves and others from the details of our personal and collective humanity for good reason: we would rather others did not know, often enough even that we ourselves did not know. The complex mess which we are – now right, now wrong, now strong, now weak, now sure, now unsure – makes the world more than we can bear without over-simplifying or letting ourselves be distracted. But we are not in this way brought to heaven. And the result is that we cease to be either properly of the world or of heaven.

Rather, we are strangely suspended, like the unfortunate Absalom: hanging between heaven and earth. This is where we live most of our lives. But if we prefer to simplify and be distracted, the gospel is that this is precisely the place that Jesus himself occupies: our *actual* place, if not our proper place – hanging on the cross, suspended between heaven and earth, apparently devoid of humanity and of God.

Why does he take up this space – our space?

Over the course of these reflections on David's story we have noticed again and again that David is the blessed one, the anointed one – literally, "the messiah" – and yet he constantly falls short. The blessed one over-reaches and loses himself. This is the story of us all. In contrast to this messiah is another – Jesus himself. Our reflections have looked at what is happening "between the messiahs" – between ourselves and Christ. Because David cannot be the messiah, neither can Jesus; the Christ is "dragged down", as it were – crucified, forced to occupy the no-man's land and no-God's land which is "the between" of the cross.

But in that space, at the between of the cross, is the revelation that the Christ is willingly dragged down because, by the power of God, it will be the means of lifting us up. The Word became *flesh* – *our* flesh in all its messy detail – in order that we might finally truly become ourselves. The detail which matters most about us is that we are known better than we know ourselves. The detail which matters most is God's very knowledge of us, and its purpose: that we be loved as we are.

The details of the stories – David's and ours – matter first because they are what make us *us*. *This* is us, for better or for worse. But the details matter also because they are known by a God who – sometimes in spite of the details, sometimes because of them – loves us and cherishes us in health *and* in sickness. This is not a simple God for a simple people. God is complex and variable because we are. And God is this, in order that we might simply be his. The scriptural writers invest so much in the detail of David's life because it is the life of one of us, as we are; and it is a remarkable thing that such a one as this does not simply fall within God's capacity to love, but is in fact the focus of that love.

This is a love which shines in our darkness and yet is not overcome by it.

For such an all-searching, all comprehending and all-embracing love, all thanks be to God. Amen.
