

Sunday 22
30/8/2015

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 23:1-7

Psalm 132

John 18:33-37

Being God's favourite

Some while back we bought for a friend a T-shirt which declared "Jesus loves you" and then, underneath and in slightly smaller text, "*but I'm his favourite.*" I know the man to whom we gave this well enough *almost* to be certain that he wears his T-shirt as a joke and for the response it gets, and not as statement of some eternal truth! For we all know that God doesn't have favourites. Or, we know this, as long as we don't read the Bible and discover that in fact it seems that God does.

We've heard from the second book of Samuel this morning what are purported to be the last words of David, which ran like this:

The oracle of David, son of Jesse,
the oracle of the man whom God exalted,
the anointed of the God of Jacob,
the favourite of the Strong One of Israel:
The spirit of the LORD speaks through *me*,
his word is upon *my* tongue.
The God of Israel has spoken,
the Rock of Israel has said to *me*...

What are we to make of such divine favouritism? For, while we might find ways of explaining away this particular text on account of its antiquity or cultural context or whatever, the theme of God's favouritism won't go away. How is it possible – to make the point most starkly – that the man Jesus can have attached to him such an extraordinary list of appellations as we hear, for example, in Revelation: the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth (e.g. Revelation 1.4b-8)? This declares what the rest of the New Testament also preaches: that this Jesus who stood "suffered under Pontius Pilate", as you or I might also have done, is *the* particular point at which God touches the world. All that matters comes down to this *one*. Jesus is, we might say, God's favourite.

Now this is, of course, patently ridiculous to much modern religious sensibility. If we do take an interest in religion, is it not clearly the case that the "one" which matters is "God", who favours *no* particular place but in his omnipresence is also omni- and equi-gracious? Many of us *need* this to be so because we've seen that any hint of divine favouritism is extraordinarily dangerous in the hands of arrogant human beings. It is theories of divine favouritism which have fuelled so much destruction among us; "Gott mit uns", "In God we trust", or that unholy trinity "God, King and Country" are but three slogans which particular peoples have wrapped around their sense that *they* are the chosen ones. What fuels the diatribe of modern popular atheism is not merely the alleged irrationality of religious belief but the sheer destruction which can spring from those who believe themselves to be God's favourites. In the hands of the Church, Jesus as "special" has proven no less a danger in this respect. Favourites divide and division

brings harm, which is why Grandma knows never to have favourites – or, at least, never to declare them!

It seems a good thing, of course, that we know better than all this these days. We've seen how human beings have claimed "God's" favouritism for themselves, and employed the rhetoric of divine blessing as justification of all kinds of violence and destruction. And so there are, *for us*, no divine favourites – or, at least, if there are any favourites there is a *bunch* of them, the number of which happens to correspond to the number of different types of religious systems and affections we recognise. Everyone may have their favourites so long as they don't impinge upon the favourites of others.

And yet, the language of favourite is implied and used in the Scriptures for Israel-in-David-to-Jesus, without apology. More scandalously, this favouritism is not of the kind which allows us others at least to be left alone in our unfavoured ordinariness. God's favouritism in David, and finally in Jesus, is something we must take heed of, for it is not only about them but about us on the "outside" also.

A community which confesses the Incarnation ought to know something about how God works in the world. For the point of the doctrine of the Incarnation is not only that God enters into the world but that God can do that *thoroughly* and still *remain* God. The "Word becomes flesh" – and is now *both* Word and *flesh*. Fleshly, fallen things – even "God-forsaken" things – are all potential means by which God might work in the world. Things marked by human disorder are ready and sufficient instruments for God's healing works. Human favouritism is a divisive and deadly thing but it is precisely this deadly thing which God uses to heal. For divine favouritism reworks what brings division and death in human favouritism and makes it an *enlivening* thing.

The test of specifically *Christian* faith is not whether or not we can convince ourselves that God "exists"; there is nothing particularly Christian about that. The test is whether or not we believe that the instruments of death might yet prove to be useful to God to bring life, quite contrary to the intention or expectations of those of us who are so adept at applying such deadly devices.

None of this is to justify human weakness and failure; it is simply to speak of what might yet be done with us by such a God. For favouritism takes on a different guise in the hands of this God. Just as the church declares that Jesus bears the divine judgement so that nobody else has to; and just as we declare that Jesus bears the loss of God in abandonment to death so that no one else any longer has to bear that loss, so we can also say that Jesus is God's favourite so that no one else *has* to be. That is, when *this* God takes a favourite, it is not in order to relegate all others to a lower order. It is to free us from any *need* to be or, perhaps more importantly, to *seek* to be, God's favourites. *Jesus* is "King" so that no other has to be. This is the character of his kingship: an exaltation which lifts up us all.

With us, favouritism implies division, and what divides only kills; for *God* what we divide with our favourites also kills – even God himself. But the gospel is that for God there is nothing which cannot be an instrument of healing unto life in his hands. To declare that Jesus is God's favourite or, in different ways, David, or Israel, or even (God forbid?!) the Church are such favourites – is to declare *not* that we or anyone else outside those circles are not God's favourites, but simply that we and they don't *need* to be. When it comes to this particular God, *I* am blessed enough, in that he favours *another*.

Is there not good news in that for us who labour and are heavy laden by many burdens, whether the burden of our own dreams for our lives, or that of anxiety for the future of the church, or worry about the future of society and world? For these are, at root, worries about whether or not God favours us or, if we are “atheists”, that society or even the universe somehow favours us? Yet, whatever we might choose to do about those things, that Christ is God’s favourite – God’s king – means that we know that we are not responsible for building up a kingdom, for this has already been done. God has chosen a kingdom and a king, and it is not our kingdom or our crown.

This actually frees us to give, to love, to serve, to forgive, simply to be ourselves when that is the best we can manage, or to become something extraordinary when the Spirit falls. For *our* hope is that, in the end, all that will really matter is what God does with us and for us. In Christ, God’s favourite, God has favoured me. I am blessed in that God has blessed Jesus of Nazareth. And that is enough of a blessing.

[1] For such a hope and the liberated lives it makes possible here and now, all thanks be to God, now and forever. Amen.
