

Sunday 30
25/10/2015

Mark the Evangelist

1 Corinthians 8:1-16

Psalm 34

Mark 10:46-52

Taste and see

In the book our study groups have just begun to consider, Stanley Hauerwas remarks that the debate today between believers and atheists has become increasingly culturally irrelevant and marginalised. One of the principle reasons for this is that believers are offering unbelievers less and less *not* to believe in. This is because of the increasing social and political irrelevance of what believers seem to hold dear – the existence of God, in particular. For the most part, religious belief is simply not particularly *interesting* to those who don't believe.

By religious belief being “interesting” I mean here, *engaging*. Thus, the question of the existence of God is largely academic: non-believers and believers alike sense that the existence of God is finally a “So what?” question. Having, say, proved the existence of God, then what? While believers have tended to assume that a proof God *implies* something, it is not at all clear *what* it might imply.

The things it is usually said *are* implied by the existence of God are various ethical and social principles and activities. Yet these don't spring from the existence of God *per se*, but from the existence of a *particular* God who happens to desire these things of us. Christians already believe in this God, and so hold dear his demands. But this doesn't work if you are not committed to the God, or to the society this God might expect.

So the Christian apologist has a problem. Having, perhaps, proven the existence of “a” god, how do we prove the god who exists demands of us the things we Christians like to think “he” does, and doesn't demand some of the ghastly things other gods have demanded? Strictly speaking, a god whose existence we can prove in this way is a god without content. It is not clear what it might then command of us, and so difference it makes. It is, in this sense, quite uninteresting.

In fact, the implications we might think flow from a proof of the existence of God generally *precede* the proof, rather than flow from it. It is because we believers have a sense for how we – and others – ought to be living that we seek to prove God. The God we seek to prove – if we even bother – *corresponds* to our sense of an appropriate social, political, and economic order.

This way of putting it opens up another way of approaching the god-question: if there are quite different social, political and economic orders, might there be more than one god?

This might seem to be the opposite of traditional Christian teaching, but in fact it gets us closer to the Scriptural sense for things than does our predominant western philosophical monotheism.

It is this Scriptural sense for God which I want to draw from our Psalm this morning, by noting one aspect of a likely hearing of what the psalmist has to say. Throughout the psalm we encounter the expression “the LORD”. Whether we are believers or not, this expression is so familiar to us culturally that we tend to hear “the LORD” as a

synonymous expression for “God”. Thus, “I will bless the LORD at all times” becomes “I will bless God at all times”; “My soul makes its boast in the LORD” becomes “My soul makes its boast in God”, and so on. It seems so obvious that this is appropriate that it hardly seems worth noting, let alone be possible that these substitutions might be misguided.

But it is important that what we see in an English text as “the LORD” (written with small capitals) is in the Hebrew not “God” but the *name* of a *particular* god. The Scriptures breathe polytheistic air. Even when a generic word for “God” is used to refer to the God of Israel, it is always with the intention of distinguishing this particular “God” from other Gods. This distinction is made by naming the different gods, and then identifying which one we’re interested in.

In the case of the expression “the LORD” in the psalm, the word “Lord” is not the religious term we hear it to be today but the name of the God David (the psalmist) addresses here. It is the same name Moses received in the burning bush story: “What is your name”, Moses asks, “that I might tell them which god has sent me?” This god’s name, “Yahweh” (Jehovah), is the name of one god among many. The scriptural question, then, is never *Does God exist?* But always: *Which god is yours?*

What difference does this make?

If “Does God exist” is not a very interesting question – now or then – “Which god is yours” is potentially *very* interesting, very engaging. This is because of what we noted earlier. If our proofs of God tend to correspond to our preferred social, political and economic orders, then it also works the other way: how we think the world ought to be ordered *implies* – a very important word here! – a god.

The gods implied in our political stories might not actually *look* like gods. They will in fact take the form of social influences, or economic obstacles, or personal histories, fears, needs or desires. They may be the *Zeitgeist* – the spirit of a time. The gods in our various stories are the *givens* according to which we think our lives and those of others ought to be ordered. Capitalism implies a certain kind of “god”, as does communism. A politics of “sovereign borders” implies a god, as does a colonial mentality in relation to “undeveloped” lands. “Law and order” politics implies a particular god, as does social libertarianism.

The point of this is to show that the world of the Scriptures with its many lords and many gods is not that different from our own world. The principle difference is that Jewish henotheism (a commitment to one god within a pantheon) was taken up by the church, along with Greek philosophical monotheism, in such a way as to separate the gods from anything in the world, and so to make them ultimately uninteresting – precisely because they are separated from the world.

It’s probably easier to see what this matters by becoming more concrete. What does this mean for the way in which the church engages with any society within which it finds itself? Or, to put the question differently, what does it mean for evangelism?

We ought first to note that “evangelism” is a scary word in churches like the Uniting Church, and probably also in congregations like ours. It is associated with a certain method and set of assumptions which leave us cold as Christians, let alone what they do to most victims of such outreach!

Yet, in terms of what I have been speaking about, evangelism is not about getting God into people; it is about getting people out of the grip of the gods which have already got them. Evangelism does not declare that “there is a God”, but that the gods are already alive and active in our lives; they just don’t look like “gods” anymore.

There is a god or a spirit which lurks in the decisions you make about what to do with your money. There is a spirit active in the thoughts which cross your mind when someone on the street asks you for “spare change”. There are spirits active when you indulge yourself in ways you’d rather others didn’t know about, and spirits active in them when they might object or not approve.

Evangelism – literally, “good-news-ing” – doesn’t inject God into a godless space; it invites a change of gods, and swapping of spirits:

“O taste and see that *the LORD* is good;
happy are those who take refuge in *him*.”

The evangelist does nothing which is not already being done actively and generally much more effectively in the world around us. Consider our Psalm, with a different god praised:

- ¹ I will bless capitalism at all times;
it praise shall continually be in my mouth.
- ² My soul makes its boast in capitalism;
let the humble hear and be glad.
- ³ O magnify capitalism with me,
and let us exalt its name together.
- ⁴ I sought capitalism, and it answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
- ⁵ Look to it, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
- ...⁸ O taste and see that capitalism is good;
happy are those who take refuge in it.

Or perhaps,

- ⁴ I sought self-fulfilment, and it answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
- ⁵ Look to it, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
- ⁶ This poor soul cried, and was heard by self-fulfilment,
and was saved from every trouble.
- ⁷ The angel of self-fulfilment encamps
around those who fear it, and delivers them.
- ⁸ O taste and see that self-fulfilment is good;
happy are those who take refuge in it.

Or maybe, in times of uncertain opinion polls:

- ¹ I will bless Malcolm at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
- ² My soul makes its boast in Malcolm;
let the humble hear and be glad.
- ³ O magnify Malcolm with me,
and let us exalt his name together.

⁴ I sought Malcolm, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
...⁸ O taste and see that Malcolm is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.

Substitute whatever you like; it's fun, and very revealing!

The point is: we are being “evangelised” all the time!

And the critical question is: what *is* the thing we can slot into those verses which makes them speak what is true for us, personally and communally? What is the “given” upon which our lives are built, the sense of the world out of which we relate to ourselves and those around us?

To be invited to “taste and see” that *the LORD* is good is to be invited not to *become* religious, but to *change* religions, even if we thought ourselves secularists. To be invited to “taste and see” that *the LORD* is good is not to be invited to *become* “spiritual” but to exchange one purportedly enlivening spirit for another which does, truly, enliven.

The Christian evangelist sides with David: “Taste and see that *the LORD* is good.”

About *how* the LORD is good, I've not said much. The psalm itself says a great deal: the LORD “saves from every trouble”, “delivers from all fears”, “rescues the righteous”. The language needs some qualification – perhaps another time! – but the point is clear. In this one is found what cannot be found elsewhere: that which gives life, pressed down and flowing over.

We are all, constantly, making professions of faith, implying gods and spirits which command our allegiance or have us under their spells.

It is in this context that we are to hear the invitation to “consider Christ”, to “taste and see”. This is God's word to us today, and to be our word to the world around us.

Let us, then, listen and speak accordingly, to God's greater glory and our richer humanity. Amen.
