

Pentecost 5
19/6/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Galatians 2:1-13
Psalm 43
Luke 8:26-39

The difficulty of grace

One of the reasons for focussing, in the way on one particular biblical book, and working our way through it, is that it enables to understand what is really going on in the exchange between the writer and those to whom he writes. That is a special benefit in relation to reading the book of Galatians because it is not exaggerating things too much to say that we are gathered here today in the way that we are *because* of the book of Galatians. The great reformer Martin Luther spoke of having wedded himself to this book. It here that he discovered, for his own desire and needs, the sense of what it means to speak of the grace of God. So we are going to try to understand over the next few months what that grace is all about – how it is different from other ways of relating to God, and what kind of ethic leads out of our experience of being embraced by God through such grace.

Out of that protestant reformation one of the great slogans was, indeed, that we are saved by grace alone. But the problem with slogans is that they get drawn out of particular historical contexts and take on a reality which is sometimes very different from what they meant in that original context. And so, for we protestants 500 years later, we often experience grace as somehow being the “easier” option – easier than the option which is being denied here, “salvation by works”. We might be given the impression that we don’t have to work very hard; God, instead, *wants* to embrace us. It is easier this way.

Paul himself knew of this reading of grace. He was himself accused of trying to please people rather than please God. His doctrine of grace rather than works was heard as letting people off the hook. The particular point of conflict – *the* point of conflict really for the New Testament, as the gospel begins to spread from Palestine into the wider Roman and Greek world, was the question of circumcision: certainly for those Gentile men who were becoming Christians, a difficult “work”! Paul is being heard so say, You don’t need to worry about that, and so is being heard to be saying, There is an easier way.

And yet it *is* a great *struggle*. It is not an easy thing for the church to get its head around. Paul is having constantly to defend himself and his apostleship. Whatever grace is, then, it is not about things being easy.

Why not? Why this great struggle? We have this morning how Paul is arguing that he is on the same side as the other apostles and yet I am different. *Why* this great struggle?

There are probably two things going on. One is that, for those who are bringing the circumcision doctrine to the Gentile Christians, that there is a question of the faithfulness of God. Has God not commanded this? Why are the laws being changed now? It is great for us if the rules are changed in our favour, of course! However, the trouble is that if the rules are changed, and we accept this, what if God changes them again? So the question of the faithfulness – the reliability of God – is the theological dimension of what is going on here. Now, we’ll hear more in a few weeks’ time of how Paul deals with that particular question.

But there is another important dimension to the whole debate. This is not so much the “vertical” one of our relationship with God, but the “horizontal” one of how we relate to each other. Another characteristic of the Reformation – particularly as it came through Luther – is that it tends to reduce the whole question of the relationship to God to *my* relationship to God: How to *I* find a righteous God? And Luther (re-)discovers the doctrine of salvation by grace, through faith. The problem is that it is not just I who might be saved in this way; it might also be you. And that is what creates the question. If you are saved but you are *different* from me, how do I know that *I* am saved? Or do I know that you are saved, or that you are *safe*. How do I know that you are not somehow contaminating me because you aren’t saved *enough*?

The question of circumcision, as a mark which distinguishes the people of the covenant with Israel from those previously outside that covenant is just one of those questions: Are we actually standing before God in the same way?

For the doctrine of grace says that God accepts you as you actually are. And we will hear a little later in the book of Galatians about how Paul declares, so far as stance before God goes, there is no Greek or Jew, there is no slave or free, there is no male or female. You have to be some combination of those things in order to be an historical human being, but the doctrine of salvation by grace says that God takes what you are and accepts what you are, and then you move on in some new direction after that.

But that is the difficulty of grace: it doesn’t lift us out of the world. It calls us into a different kind of relationship with those who are not *me*. We have lots of ways of relating to others: they are part of my family (therefore, they are special); they are part of my community, or my country, or my religion or my faculty or my workplace. These are ways in which, in one sense, we rely upon “law” to relate us to those around us. But the problem being wrestled with in the early church is that grace is that grace is also mediated “horizontally” and not just “vertically”.

The effect of this – the very hard thing with which the church is wrestling in these texts – is the fact that we are called, as those who have received grace, to *be* gracious. Christian discipleship is about growing – not just in the grace of God, that we might actually receive and realise how rich that gift actually is. It is also about growing in graciousness. It is about being in a God-like way to those who are around us.

This is what we embody week after week as we gather around this table. We embody grace in the sense that we recognise that we are invited. We come forward, recognising that we are not invited because of what we have done. We are invited because what is on the table is a sign of our capacity for violence toward each other – the capacity of the people of God to want to *kill* God. And so we persist with “body” and “blood” – as icky as that language is – because it reminds us what we are capable of and it shows us what God is capable of overcoming. So there is grace for each one of us, to come forward, to receive that, no longer as an accusation but as God’s embrace of us.

And as we are embraced in our reception of the bread and the wine, we embrace those who gather around the table with us. For we are not invited alone. We are invited to accept graciously the person on our left and our right, and also those on the other end of the line who always sit in a different part of the church. There is not Holy Communion which is not *communal*. God’s grace to us is always doubly mediated: through Jesus, but Jesus appears among us with the face of another person. “God is always somewhere” concrete and tangible – to recall our children’s address this morning. That is the gift and the call.

Grace is God's word for those who are heavily laden. It is a word which brings with it a light and easy yoke. We are here to receive that gift, to take on that yoke, that peace and love and hope might have a chance in a world where the righteousness we think we have *earned* leads too often to judgement and division.

(Slightly edited transcript from recording)