

Trinity Sunday
14/6/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 1:26-2:4a

Psalm 8

Matthew 28:16-20

Mission, and Eating God

I want to draw our attention to that part of today's gospel reading we have come to call "the Great Commission", to tease out our sense for mission and for the God who commissions us in this particular way. I'll do this by drawing on two pithy little statements I came across in my reading last week, neither of which would seem – on the surface – to have much to do with mission or God as Trinity but which leapt off the page for me in connection with mission two quite different ways.

One is the maxim, "what is measured is managed" and the other is a paraphrase from David Foster Wallace: Everybody worships...and pretty much anything you worship will eat you alive. Let's see how these illuminate our approach to mission and the God who commissions.

"What is measured is managed". As soon as I read that I wondered, What do we – as a church – measure? We measure our *money*. Each year we spend thousands upon thousands of dollars for auditors and our parish administrator and some of my time, and on top of that perhaps hundreds of volunteer hours making sure that the figures are all correct. We present to the Church Council and then to the Congregational Meeting a fat wad of papers that declare what we have measured and how well we have managed what we have. This is straightforward and understandable.

But I wondered, in what way do we measure – and so *manage* – mission? Perhaps it's even a horrifying thought to imagine that mission might be managed. When it comes to talking about mission we think, Worship is mission; we have "Hotham Mission". But the missional character of these things is hard to measure and to manage. What is going on when we measure so closely one aspect of our lives but for other aspects we make almost no measurements at all?

When Jesus says go forth to teach and preach and to baptize he expects something to happen. We ourselves are here today precisely because something *has* happened on account of others' obedience to the call. We manage our resources very well. We understand a balanced budget in terms of those resources. What does a "balanced budget" look like in terms of mission?

I don't actually know! This is a very open question. But I wonder what, just as year after year we imagine that we have to secure one aspect of our lives – our finances and our resources, our risks – it would mean to manage our mission in a corresponding kind of way. What would it mean for us as a church to say that, at the end of 2017 ('18,'19?) we will have baptized one more person into the kingdom, not just the fortuitous arrivals which come from having young parents in the congregation but somebody who has encountered the gospel in the work of the congregation. There is a measurement there and it would require a certain kind of management: what the minister does with her/his time on? How should the Church Council apportion its time? What sort of things would the congregation do, or what would we expect of congregational members, if we managed our mission in the same way we manage our money?

This *is* an open question. Yet Jesus says, *Go*, and he expects something to happen. What do *we* expect to happen?

I'm going to leave that question there – open.

Perhaps more fundamental is the question, *Why* engage with mission? What in fact *is* mission? Why would we consider “evangelism”, something which makes many of us very nervous?

This brings us to the second of our pithy statements: Everyone worships... and pretty much anything you worship will eat you alive. In fact I'm paraphrasing because the original author was merely being *insightful* but I want to be *Christian*, and so I'm pushing it a little harder than he did.

“Everyone worships”, which is to say that everyone has at the heart of their lives something which drives them. It is around such things that we orient our lives. It might be security; money and other resources; our relationships and family; our health; our “sovereign borders”. These are things which define our world for us – “everybody worships” whether they imagine themselves to be “*religious*” or not. Our lives are all oriented around something.

But then Wallace continues (and here is where I intensify him a bit): pretty much anything you worship will eat you alive. What is meant by that is that you are not going to get life out of the things you worship. We see a very simple example of this in the person who worships just her health or primary relationship, or just his money, being reduced in his/her integrity or humanity by focusing so narrowly on such things. But, more broadly, part of what is consumed in this process is not just us but those around us. Worshipping the wrong things reduces not only us as individuals but reduces also our communal humanity. Pursuing something at all costs will cost somebody else, in addition to whatever it might cost us. We will be consumed, and consume others in the process.

Now, the church is not immune to this. The people of God is well able to worship the wrong thing. This is what gets messiahs crucified. But there is, at the heart of Christian confession, a different sense for being consumed, or what is consumed. At the heart of Christian faith we learn that *this* God does *not* consume us. God says, rather, *Eat me*: “This is my body; take and eat. This is my blood; take and drink”. It is a total reversal of Wallace's point. We don't live this very well, but this is what Christian faith is about – being nourished by consuming the God who gives himself to us, breathes our very life into us, sustains and promises to us a future. Take, Eat. Take, Drink: “Consume *me*”. This God is not a threat, will not consume us.

Yet this God is a strange kind of food. Usually, what we eat we turn into ourselves. A soft and sweet cream bun becomes just more Craig, and so forth. But the gospel is that, as we eat God, we become not our *own* body but the body of God, the body of Christ. Eat this, *become* this. It is a very strange food indeed.

[And, just as an aside and as a concession to today's Feast: the reason that the church confesses God as Trinity – that strange and obscure mathematics by which three is one and one is three – is to make sense of how it might actually be that God can give Godself to us in this kind of way: being consumed by us and then making us the very presence of God.]

And this is where mission comes in.

God gives Godself in this way that we might eat God and *become* the presence of God. And, as the presence of God, we are given to the world to be consumed: the body of Christ, given for you. This is spoken first to the disciples but then spoken to the world as whole: the body of Christ, given *for you*.

The mission of the church is to be consumed by the world, that the world might become the presence of God.

This is our joy, and our burden, and our joy.
