

Pentecost 21
29/10/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Deuteronomy 34:1-12
Psalm 90
Matthew 22:34-46

His Body Carries the Story

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

God, help me by your Spirit to proclaim Jesus as Messiah and Lord; and help those who listen to proclaim him where I fail. Amen.

In our Gospel reading for today Jesus offers his two great commandments: love God with the fullness of who you are, and love others as you do yourself. In a sermon I once heard on this text the preacher compared the two commandments of Jesus with the ten offered by Moses. The preacher summarised glibly: “there used to be ten commandments, now there are two; times change, what are you going to do about it?” While for me this was less than helpful it raised two important responses:

First, not every sermon is a good one - this could be one of those.

Second, it raises a question pertinent to our first reading today from Deuteronomy: is Jesus really trying to bring an end to the law of Moses by instituting his own commandments? As it were, taking the death of Moses further by replacing Moses’ law.

Many commentators have noted the parallels between Moses and Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, suggesting that this Gospel paints Jesus as a new Moses figure. Motifs from Moses’ life recur in the way Matthew’s Gospel tells the story of Jesus:

A ruler ordering the murder of firstborn Jewish sons, time spent in Egypt, and then a flight into the desert, delivering commandments from atop a mountain.

Is Jesus, then, simply a new Moses? Replacing the old with the new for a changed time and place?

Our Psalm for today, Psalm 90, cautions us against this suggestion. This prayer, ascribed to Moses, tells us of the God Moses and Jesus worshipped. Standing before all of creation -- “from everlasting to everlasting” -- for the God of Moses a thousand years is like a day. This God is a dwelling-place for all generations, overwhelming our afflictions with endless gladness.

It doesn’t seem that the God of both Moses and Jesus is subject to the changing of the times, in need of replacing and updating the old law with the new.

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees isn’t first and foremost a question of changing religious law - not least because it repeats commands already present in the Mosaic law. If there is a parallel between Moses and Jesus in today’s reading we should not think of the Jesus preaching from a Mountain, proclaiming new commandments. If there is a parallel, it is with the Moses who plays a central role in the foundation story of Israel: the Exodus out of slavery in Egypt, into God’s reign over the promised land. In Matthew 22 Jesus’ encounter with religious leaders expands this same story of God’s reign: from the promised land to this veiled notion of the Kingdom of Heaven. What Jesus begins to explain in the parable of the wedding feast -- (about which Craig

preached a couple of weeks ago) -- is further developed in Jesus' responses to the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Jesus' teachings on the greatest commandment and the question about David's Son is not a demonstration of Jesus as legal and Scriptural exegete. Rather, these teachings shape the identity and place of Jesus within the story of Israel - a story over which the God of Moses reigns. Indeed this is the same story in which Moses played a central role. This is the same story in which King David is heralded as the great King, mediating God's rule over the promised land. The same story into which God reveals the very commandments that Jesus cites in retort to the Pharisees.

The Catholic New Testament scholar Brendan Byrne notes that it was not unknown within the Judaism of Jesus' time for the law to be distilled to a single principle or all-embracing command. But what is particular about Jesus' teaching is that he distills the law to *two* deeply connected commands: love God with the fullness of who you are, and love others as you do yourself.

The rejoinder Jesus offers to the Pharisees in today's reading is not that they have misunderstood the law. Rather, they have misunderstood the story of God's people into which the law enters. As we read this passage Christologically, and with the foreknowledge of where this story is headed, we can see that it is Jesus who carries this story in his own life. Jesus' expression of his love of God coincides with his love of neighbour, on this basis he is able to counter the Pharisees' myopic focus on questions of law.

Tying together the commandment to love God with fullness, and to love your neighbour expands our vision of righteousness. The demand for personal piety before God is incomplete without a concern for one's neighbour. Allowing these two commands, taken together, to shape our imagination of God brings focus to the central event of Christian faith: the cross. In this event Jesus' own love for God draws him fully into love for neighbour. And so the two great commandments of Jesus are not abstract commands, but in an odd sort of way they narrate Jesus' own life, death, and resurrection. These commands place Jesus' life, death, and resurrection at the centre of the drama of God. These commands tell of a God who is ultimately known in the salvific act on behalf of neighbour: the salvation of humanity and the world on the cross.

The God who draws together the love of God with the love of neighbour is none other than this Jesus, the Jewish Messiah.

“What do you think of the Messiah?”

As I reflected on this text in preparing this sermon I was drawn more and more to reflect on the second part of today's reading. The questions Jesus poses became my questions:

“Whose son is the Messiah?”

“The Son of David?”

“How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord | If David thus calls [the Messiah] Lord, how can he be his son?”

Jesus the Messiah is the culmination of the story of Israel, the same story in which Moses played a central role, the same story that continued after Moses' death with the reign of God in the promised land. Connecting the identity of the Messiah to David, the

great king of Israel, connects the Messiah to the ongoing reign of God in the world. What Matthew calls the Kingdom of Heaven.

The question about David's Son makes clear that the Messiah is the one that ushers in an expanding vision of the reign of God. Jesus does not deny that the Messiah is the Son of David. Indeed Jesus is introduced in the opening line of Matthew's Gospel precisely as Messiah, the Son of David. But insofar as the Messiah continues the role of David in mediating the reign of God into the world he takes this reign further. The Messiah is somehow more than David. The Messiah further unfolds the story of God's reign - the story of the Kingdom of Heaven. Beyond the people of Israel to all peoples and the whole world.

For those of us in the Reformed-Protestant tradition, gathering on the Sunday before the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, these are not idle or distant observations. We ourselves are heirs to the idea that the Good News is still unfolding, and we are called to participate in this unfolding. Responding by proclaiming like David that the Messiah is Lord -- in fresh words and deeds. Recognising that our proclamation is shaped by what has gone before us, but always seeing in Christ a growing and ever expanding vision of righteousness.

The Good News is the story of Jesus Christ in whom the story of God's people is brought to its culmination. For in Christ the love of God has been brought together with the love of neighbour, for our gain and Christ's loss. This is Good News! We are the neighbours that receive the gracious love of God. We are brought into the story of the people of God by the Jewish Messiah who carries that story in his body. And in response we are called to proclaim as true what is true: that Jesus the Messiah is also Lord. We are called to participate in the righteousness that Jesus offers us, the righteousness that brings together the love of God and the love of neighbour. We are called to proclaim the Good News not as a lifeless end, but as an ongoing story that generates Hope, that expands the reign of God, the reach of love, and the care for neighbour.

May we, like David, proclaim by the Spirit that Jesus the Messiah is Lord. May we receive the gracious love of God. And may we tell the story of Jesus until we too are caught up in the drama.

Amen.
