

Advent 2
10/12/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85
Mark 1:1-8

God is coming.
And it is the end of you.

To those looking for peace comes the cry,

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid.”

God is coming! Make the way straight! “Cry out!”

And what shall we cry?

“All people are *grass*, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; *surely* the people are grass...”

You’ve gotta love the Old Testament prophets for their capacity to punch, square in the face, any easy forgiveness or cheap attempts to leap out of the world as it is into sentimental notions of paradise on earth or of eternal life! Isaiah declares: God is coming. And No One. Gets Out. Alive. Comfort, O comfort my people...

How do we respond to this? Horror, revulsion or terror would make sense to any normal person who took it seriously. But what about the people gathered here today? Does this horrify, terrify us as well? Are *we* “normal”?

The *abnormality* to which we are called as conspirators with Isaiah and disciples of Jesus is that we not be horrified here. Rather, we are to find ourselves set free with the realisation that we are not divine. That we are grass, that we are mortal, is the mark of our *creatureliness*.

We need, of course, to speak carefully. There is here no *exultation* in our mortality. It is not a thing to celebrate; it is just “a thing.” “No one gets out alive” is the *law*. It is, simply, the case. The function of law is to limit: only drive this fast, only drink this much, keep your hands to yourself; that far and no further. The law constrains, which is precisely what Isaiah declares here: you are constrained. You are flowers and grass, and will wither and fade.

We all *know* this, of course. What matters is the impact we allow the fact of our mortality to have. If our mortality is fundamentally offensive to us, then we labour to keep it at bay, to preserve ourselves as long as possible, to hold death at a distance by whatever power or influence we have. Life understood in these finds Isaiah’s mortal realism horrifying, terrifying, or repulsive. Who needs – or wants – to be reminded of the enemy when the work of our lives is to keep us hidden from that enemy for as long as possible? We see this in ourselves and in others, and we might characterise it as a *deathly* mortality. It knows only the *law* and its *limits*.

But Isaiah’s proclamation does not call us to this but, rather, to a *lively* mortality. This is a mortality – a *creatureliness* – which knows the limit and exults not in *it* but in the

freedom which *comes* with it. This is the freedom not to *have* to survive, the freedom of not being *necessary*. The *gospel* in Isaiah's proclamation is not simply that Israel's "sins are taken away". The *content* of those sins was the drive to make ourselves necessary, the denial of death's final claim on us and of the possibility that we might cease to be. Isaiah's gospel is that when God comes that kind of striving and anxiety is no longer required.

A deathly mortality is reflected in the corresponding deathly *life*: a life lived at heart in fear of – or revulsion at – the God who defines us as creatures, as grass. This is a life which finds it insufficient to be in the *form* or image of God and grasps at more (Genesis 3; Philippians 2).

A *lively* mortality is one which would live life to its fullest. A lively mortality celebrates the approach of God because it is when God comes as Creator above, and beyond, and yet *for*, us that we come to ourselves.

Here the law finds its *end* – its purpose: God being God, creature being creature, in the same moment. (This is, of course, what we say is the meaning of Christmas: the coincidence of God and the world, Christ as the end of the law, not only in his death but in his birth.)

In neither the lively nor the deathly experience of our death is that death any less real. All that matters is which way death's shadow falls.

If it falls towards us, on this side of our inevitable definition in death, then our life is lived in a valley of death's shadow. We live and die in a twilight; aware of the hint of more but not able to do much more than light candles and fires against the encroaching gloom.

But if death's shadow falls away from us, on the *other* side of death, this means that death is obscure, that we cannot see what is beyond it, what it holds for us. This is to say that death is incomprehensible. And *this* is to say that *we* – who are mortal – do not yet now what we are. What it finally means to be a creature is still hidden from us, even if we walk now in the light. But we need no longer be jumping at the shadows.

This is the death – and the life – to which we are called, in all its incomprehensibility. And the word about all this is given in Isaiah for our comfort: when God comes, we *become* as we are created to be.

In the church, of course, we also hear rumours of resurrection, of death overcome and of life without end. At heart, this way of speaking is to say the same thing with a different emphasis or accent. Resurrection does not deny our death but only changes it; the "only", however, is momentous: freedom from fear, life along straight and level pathways.

The gospel is that God is coming. And this will be the end of you. And a new beginning.

God comes that we might know that we are not God, that we are not *necessary* and do not need to try to be. More than merely necessary, we are *loved*, desired, by the God who created us in order that he might come to us, and we to him.

And God *will* come, and come, and come, and come... until we are his.

Now and always, all praise and glory be to the God who creates, sustains and sets us free. Amen.
