

Epiphany 5
4/2/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalm 147

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

God is not a god

Let us consider the following proposition: if God is God, then God is not *a* god.

Chances are that makes no sense to almost anyone – yet – but it matters. It matters because we need constantly to work on how we speak about God, and it matters because how we speak about God affects how we speak about ourselves, and how we act towards each other. A sense for God is implied in how we relate to each other.

Last week we noted that polytheism – the belief that there is more than one god – is the natural environment of the Scriptures. In such an environment religious conviction is not about whether you believe “that” there is a god (our contemporary question), but about *which* of the many candidates for divinity in your life you’ve committed to. In such an environment, the Scriptural imperative is: believe in *this* god – the LORD, Yahweh – for this is the one which matters.

Of course, things which concern us deeply are never that simple. At the same time, parts of the Scriptures do insist that there is only one god and that the other candidates are *not* gods.

This, however, has very a strange effect. If the others are not gods, then God – the *one* god – is not a god either. In order for there to be “a” god, there has to be more than one.

To justify this assertion, let’s consider the less controversial matter of the plurality of “Davids.” Davids are useful for our purposes because they are everywhere. On account of this, we might say “Oh, we have *a* David in our congregation” (or, in our case, four or five Davids). A David is a kind of thing, of which there are many instances.

By contrast, we *don’t* say that we live in *an* Australia. There is only one Australia (at least, as a geographical entity); it is not a *kind* of thing which Australias are, and so the name and the thing coincide.

As it is with Davids and Australias, so it is also with gods. If there are many gods, each is god; if there is but one God, God is not “a” god, but a name of a unique “thing”.

This brings us to Isaiah’s vision of God this morning. The second half of the book of Isaiah is characterised by an extraordinary sense of the uniqueness of the God of Israel, summed up in verse 25 today: “To whom shall you compare me?”

But an *enormous* theological problem is now beginning to open up. If there is nothing with which to compare God – if God is not *a* god – then from where do we get our ideas about God’s godness? We might think we know what “a” god is, but if God is *not* a god, then... what? With Davids, it’s easy. There are many Davids because Davidness *is* comparable and transferrable; this is why they were *named* David in the first place. We *bestow* something when we name a child: perhaps we honour an ancestor and hope for something of the same in our son, or perhaps we simply resonate with a cultural vibe which mysteriously communicates that now is the time for more Davids (which is why Davids tend to come in generational clusters).

But Isaiah's vision pulls this rug out from under us. If the one which Israel and the Church designates as "God" is not *a* god, then what we *think* a god is, or whether we think we *need* a god, tells us nothing useful about this One: "To whom shall you compare me?" To no one, and to nothing.

The biblical answer to the whence of a proper sense for God is *God's words and actions*: God is what God says and does. But I don't want to develop this much further today. Rather, I want to move to how the incomparability of God affects the way we relate to each other, for there is *political* or social effect of such a sense for God.

Last week we noted the relationship between the plurality of the gods and the plurality of our fears. The gods divide us along the lines of our fears. This has always been recognised. A single religious conviction is a useful political concept for stability within national borders (cf. the post-Reformation notion, *Cuius regio, eius religio*, which stabilised nations by allowing monarchs to specify which of the warring religious factions would be "the" religion of that country).

But unity of conviction for political or philosophical convenience simply shifts the problem of divided hearts and minds, or just ignores it. The political solution of a single religion with a single god moves the problem of division from communities within the national borders to the borders themselves. The philosophical solution of a single god or the naïve proposal that there is no god are both abstractions which simply don't take seriously how we actually are.

For *how we are* is that we are divided. But it's important that we are not divided simply because we *have* gods; we also have gods *because* we are divided. The gods are *extensions* of us. They are ourselves with our contrary fears and aspirations, writ large. It is because I can compare myself with you that I can invoke a contrary god against you; the gods are many things to many people. This comparability and contrariness runs very, very deep. The political and philosophical solutions don't work because the divisions are not overcome; they are either pushed into the background or ignored.

By contrast, consider Paul's declaration in our epistle this morning: I have become all things to all people. He speaks here of his particular vocation as evangelist but, adapted for each particular vocation, this is how each Christian disciple is called – and *enabled* to be – if the God of the church is truly "incomparable".

Paul's being "all things" is not in any sense about him being "flexible". It is about seeing the barriers between himself and all others as *broken down*. He sees others not in terms of their difference from him – the comparability of their fears and gods – but in terms of their commonality with him, in Christ.

This would be socially and religiously arrogant were it not that Paul himself has been subject to precisely the same redefinition. What he once thought was a matter of comparative wisdom and strength in himself – his God over against the gods of others – has been stripped away. What he has met in the crucified and risen Jesus is the sovereign freedom of the One who does not fear the cross, who is not bound by death. The incomparability of the God Isaiah proclaims is the freedom of the God of encountered in Jesus, and this is the God in whom Paul now lives and moves. It is God's divine freedom which frees Paul, on the one hand, and binds him to his neighbours, on the other.

God does not divide because he is free to be *against* all who would wrongly claim him as an ally, and free to be *for* all who can do nothing other than simply wait on him. This for-ness and against-ness – of the same people – is the incomparability of the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ. All other putative gods are for us and against our enemies, such that we can only be some things for some people.

This God enables and calls us to more.

With Paul, then, let us allow ourselves to be found within the incomparable God, that we and those we meet might know something of the blessing of the God who keeps his distance from any one of us, that he might be the God of love for all of us.

Amen.
