

Lent 2
25/2/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 17:1-10, 15-19
Psalm 22
Mark 8:27-38

How not to fall on your face

Conventional wisdom has it that falling on your face is, generally, not a good idea.

And yet in our story this morning, in which God repeats the covenant promise to Abraham, the patriarch falls on his face twice – once for better, once for worse.

For the better, Abraham's first fall is in holy awe. God declares 'I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous'. This is, for Abraham, a very good thing. Falling on his face is an appropriate response to the presence of one whose intention is sheer, overwhelming *gift*.

But then, for the worse, Abraham falls on his face with laughter at the suggestion that he and Sarah would now share a child. This is not happy laughter but derisive, and Sarah later laughs in the same way (Genesis 18.12ff). 'Come on God, let's not be silly', and he takes God aside to show him Ishmael: 'The son I already have can be your means.' And God says, No. So much for at least one human reception of divine gift.

Yet, when we swing across to the gospel we see the same dynamic. In response to the question about the identity of Jesus, Peter apparently answers perfectly: You are the Christ. In Matthew's more expansive account Jesus congratulates Peter for recognising who Jesus is. We are here at the midpoint climax of Mark's gospel: Jesus accepts the title 'Christ', and the very next episode is the Transfiguration of Jesus: *This is my Son; here* is the sheer gift of the God. Peter's declaration is a falling down moment of holy awe, even if he remains upright.

But then comes the derision. Jesus tells of his coming rejection and suffering at the hands of the people and Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him – another falling down in mocking laughter. And Jesus says, No.

If, on account of their significance in the biblical stories, we were to take Abraham and Peter as *types* – as models or patterns – of how the holy people receive the holy God – then there is something about us which both enables us to recognise God, and causes us not to.

What are we to do with this? I've titled this sermon, How not to fall on your face, to which we now come: the 'application' of what we've seen in the readings today.

It hurts just as much whether you fall on your face with holy awe or with derisive dismissal of God's proposals. But there is a difference between the pain of these two falls: one is God's gift and the other is God's curse.

The gift is the shock which wakes us up in the way that only a fall can. And we need to be woken up, sleepwalkers through life that we are.

The curse is God's response to our presumption to speak too quickly. Having just woken and opened our eyes, we imagine they are already adjusted to the light. No longer asleep but blinded, we find God to be a stumbling block and we hit the ground again, now unnecessarily.

Falling on your face *for the better* is an entirely appropriate response to a God whose approach fills and illuminates and completes far beyond your wildest dreams.

The way to avoid falling on your face *for the worse* is simply not to get up after the first fall. Presumably Abraham recovered from his initial shock and climbed to his feet before he hit the ground the second time. For Peter, the difference between a fall for the better and one for the worse is the difference between answering a question Jesus had asked him and presuming to answer a question Jesus had not asked.

Christian discipleship is about not getting up after falling on your face that first time. This is what it means to take up a cross and follow Jesus.

This is all metaphorical, of course. I'm not talking about 'giving up' or refusing 'to get back on that horse,' or staying on the ground as a doormat for others or even for God. It is important to counter such defeatist mindsets when we meet them but we are far beyond the power of positive thinking here.

Carrying our cross, or falling on our face for the better, is a matter of adopting an appropriate posture before a God who draws the world as it is into the world which is promised by such crazy means as a Geriatric Conception (let alone a virginal one) and a crucified Christ. For these are the same thing: God pressing through what we believe him to be, to become the God he wills yet to be.

To take up a cross and to follow Jesus is to look up from the ground and to blink into the light at the sight of an impossible child in an impossible place – Jesus on the cross. It is to let the light which that sight is slowly to wash out the shadows, slowly to come into focus. It is to see that the last thing God should do is the only thing God does.

To take up our cross and follow, or to remain prostrate in holy awe, is to live in thanksgiving, that even the unholiness of the holy people of God is no barrier to the overwhelming gift of God.

According to your preference, then: Take up Your Cross and, or just Fall on Your Face, and watch as God calls into existence things as yet unimagined and raises the dead – even us.
