

Easter 2  
8/4/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 1:1-4  
Psalm 133  
John 20:19-31

### Evangelism as Desire

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The first four words in our translation from 1 John this morning make all the difference to the sense of the text, and not for the better. Rather, they suck most of the life out of it.

The opening words of the passage in the English – ‘We declare to you’ – are not in the Greek text (they are repeated here from later in the text [v2a]), and their insertion flattens the passage into a kind of creedal statement: this was from the beginning. We heard it, we saw it, we touched it, it was the word of life, and so on.

But the Greek is *breathless*, almost ecstatic: ‘That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we have looked at, that which our hands have touched...’ With each phrase the reader’s – or listener’s – interest builds up: what is the ‘that’ to which John refers? An answer is then given as a kind of plateau – ‘the word of life’ – before the build-up continues: this life was revealed, and we have seen and we testify and we declare to you... And finally comes the climax, that which is to be declared: this is the eternal life that was with the Father.

But as important as the *what* which is declared here is the *why* of his interest in those whom John addresses. The *why* is, perhaps, surprising. The work of prophets and evangelists is generally cast as being for the benefit of those to whom the message is directed. The evangelist proclaims, that you might be ‘saved’, whatever ‘saved’ might mean: Repent *now*, lest the proverbial bus take you out tonight on your way home and it is then too late (although no skin off *my* nose!)

There is some of this in the letter from John: eternal life is with the Father; *our* fellowship is with the Father (and with his Son); we declare these things so that *you* may have fellowship with *us* and, so, *with the Father*. There is a clear interest in the well-being of those to whom John writes.

But there is another driving motivation, perhaps even the dominant one: ‘We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete’. John *needs* a positive response to his proclamation so that his community’s own experience of God might be filled out, so that *their* joy may be complete. It is not that those to whom he writes have something which John’s faithful community needs. This is certainly implied in many churches today, where the recent rediscovery of the call to mission is affected (or even effected) by the decline of the church and the need for more people in the pews to keep the show on the road. This kind of desire for the other springs from a *lack* of confidence in the gospel, and often has us *questioning* what once we thought was from the beginning, what we had heard, seen, and touched.

John’s desire is nothing like this. It springs not from doubt about God’s work in Christ but from confidence: this *is* the word of life, the eternal life which was with the Father, and we have seen it. The message itself compels John to write and to invite.

But he also has an interest in the response of his readers: 'I want to be joyful, but I can't be joyful, till God makes you joyful too!' John hungers for those to whom he writes. This is not a hunger which would see them consumed, and turned into John himself. We can't always affirm this some of the mission strategies anxious churches might adopt. John's hunger is for the joy that begets joy.

Imagine if the church's call to 'mission' were not merely to express God's *love* for the world – what God 'gives' the world – but to express God's *desire* for the world – what God 'needs' from the world? Mission as desire is how *God* works in the world. The work of Christ is the expression of the desire of God for the 'chosen' people and, through them, for the whole of the world. Without them, *God's own joy* is incomplete. This is the internal necessity of the resurrection, that the extent of God's desire for the world not be left denied in the cross but be manifest to all who could bear it.

It ought not to surprise us that, if God's desire is what makes it possible for us to gather to this place, it is Godly desire we are also to take from it.

In the Scriptures of desire – the beautiful Song of Solomon – we read,

<sup>3.1</sup> Upon my bed at night  
I sought him whom my soul loves;  
I sought him, but found him not;  
I called him, but he gave no answer.  
<sup>3.2</sup> 'I will rise now and go about the city,  
in the streets and in the squares;  
I will seek him whom my soul loves.'  
I sought him, but found him not.

Interpreting the Songs is notoriously difficult but we could with good reason surmise that the one who rises from bed in search of 'whom my soul loves' is both the God who again and again ventured out to find his lost people, *and* those people themselves, when they are most Godlike, who do the same in God's stead. Evangelism as *imperative*, as command, is mere law – and is as boring and as terrifying as laws tend to be. Evangelism as *desire* makes our address to the world something entirely different. Such evangelism might still be hard work but it would also be, with John's, breathless, filled with anticipation, bordering on the ecstatic:

that which we have heard, that which has penetrated to the depths of who we are,

that which has known us *and yet* loved us, that which has washed us and fed us and fitted us to speak this word – the very word of life – *this* we declare to you, that you might know it too, that *our* joy might be completed by *yours*, in God.

She who arose from her bed in the Songs to search for "him who my soul loves" finally finds him. 'When I found him whom my soul loves...I held him, and would not let him go.'

This is the meaning of the resurrection – the Father finds again the lost Son. This re-discovery is hidden from us, as the event of the resurrection itself is hidden, but we see its effect in the appearance of the re-found Jesus to his disciples. Jesus appears that they may be surprised by joy: surprised to find their hearts' desire in him whom they rejected, and so discover in him the depth of God's desire for them.

If the risen one is the *crucified* one – if he bears the marks of the nails in his hands and the spear in his side, as Thomas knew that he should – then what must finally be heard on our lips is something like John’s own testimony:

What we have heard, what we have seen, what we have touched and tasted – the very word of life – to this we testify, and we invite you: listen, and look, and touch and taste, and see that the Lord is good.

It remains, then, only that such a lost-and-found people – even we gathered here today – grow not only in desire *for* God but in the desire *of* God, in Godly desire, ‘that the world may know’.

Let us, then, pray to grow.

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