

Pentecost
20/5/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 4:1-12

Psalm 104

John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Bound by a liberating Spirit

In a sentence:

The Spirit of God binds us together for love

We live in an age of the resurgence of ‘spirit, a certain sense for ‘*spirituality*’ which has developed in the last generation or two as a way of expressing how many people feel they experience themselves and the world: as ‘spiritual’ persons.

This is, in part, a reaction against drier, rationalist accounts of the world, ourselves and God which have dominated Western society (at least) over the last century or two. But there is more than this in general spirit-think. At heart, ‘spirit’ conveys *freedom*. Spirit resists capture, crosses boundaries, shakes foundations. This is the opposite of what cultural constructs like institutions do, whether the institution be a social organisation, a language, a religion or a just set of mores. ‘I’m not religious but I am interested in spirituality’ is a statement which sums up the contrast. Institutions – religion among them – fix in place; spirit breaks free. And we live in a freedom-seeking age.

But there is a very deep problem here. Jesus did not say – but might well have said – Where two or three gather in my name, there you have an institution (cf. Matt 18.20). Institutions – tangible and intangible – spring from community, from the need of otherwise separate individuals to negotiate a way of being together. The weight of an institution is the weight of life together. Sometimes we can lighten that load, but we will always do that by shifting the burden to another institution if it is ‘we’ and not ‘I’ which does this.

The problem here is that if we invoke spirit or spirituality to set us free from all this, spirit comes to stand over against a fundamental characteristic of our life together – that we always, and must, construct modes of relating to each other. Against this, certain understandings of the spiritual allow me to shut my eyes so that you disappear and there is only me and God (or whatever it is I see when my eyes are closed).

To the notion of spirit as *escape* from one another, John says No, although we have to strain to hear it. There has been a painful split in his community around what we might consider a ‘mere’ doctrinal point – whether or not Jesus was the incarnation of the divine Son of God. But for John the distinction between doctrine and ethics doesn’t hold; that the incarnation deniers have in fact separated themselves is as much their failure as the denial. To confess the wrong thing and to do the wrong thing are the same.

In our reading this morning, John implies that the deniers have invoked an inadequate sense of ‘spirit’ and this has led to the division of the community, the rejection of the ‘institution’ (we might say) by which they first gathered.

If we were to try to reconstruct the theology *against* which John writes, it might go something like this: God is spirit, and we are spirit. Our physical embodiment is secondary to our spiritual being, so that what happens to or between our bodies does not, finally, matter (perhaps this is why they could say, ‘we have no sin’ [cf. 1.8]). The

death of Jesus is itself a denial of embodiment, a *liberation* from body, a denial that physical things matter; only the spirit of the risen Son is important. The spirit of the Son is free, as we can be free.

On this understanding, John's insistence on love makes little sense. Love requires bodies, and not only the case in the instance of sexual expression. Bodies are the means of creating personal histories, which are what give us our identities. And these interactions create 'institutions,' rules of engagement, ways of being together, *bindings* between persons; a community is a 'body' (consider 'the body of Christ' – a body of bodies). Such things are all intimately associated with what we are in and as our embodiment. Wafting spirits neither bind nor are bound (cf. John 3.8). Bodies, on the other hand, do these things all the time.

And so John declares what is otherwise almost incomprehensible in connection to spirit:

^{4,2}By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.

The real human body of Jesus the Son 'in the flesh' matters because our bodies matter, and our bodies matter because the body of Jesus the Son matters.

What John says, then, is that *how we are* – that we are embodied persons in space and time, springing from each other and into each other – is of the utmost importance for faith.

The ties that bind us to each other – how we interpret our embodiment – *will* sometimes be too tight, will strangle. This is the meaning of the prophets' rage against the barrenness of Israel's religion, even though it is also God's religion. It is also the meaning of John's own command to love, to overcome stale expressions of community, too harsh regulation, or not enough regulation, in order that more joyful life together might be embodied.

But while the ties which bind are sometimes too tight, there is no *unbound* life before God or before each other. The Spirit of God is the Spirit which points to God's own binding of himself in the life and death of Jesus. Jesus does not give up his body on the cross; he refuses to disconnect from those who disconnect him, who unbind themselves from him. If God is really only there when I shut my eyes and can no longer see you – when I count you as dead – then I'm dealing with the wrong god.

John does not say then, that the Spirit will make us confess the correct creed. He says that the Spirit will make us human, and that it does this by binding us together in love. It is to this that the doctrine about Jesus as the incarnate Son points. As God has been to us, even to the point of death, so we are to be to each other.

Spirituality should indeed set us free, but not *from* each other. The Spirit which points to Jesus sets us free from all which *might* separate us from our fullest humanity or, to put it differently, the Spirit sets us *for* each other.

Where the Spirit of Christ is, there is freedom – to love.

Let us then heed John's call: love one another as God has loved us.

In the name of the one who is lover, beloved, and love. Amen.

In confessional response:

We offer thanks and praise, O God,
because you have created and sustained us
and all things.

And yet we confess that,
in thought, word and deed,
we have not loved you with our whole heart
nor our neighbours as ourselves.

Forgive us when we seek in you
a hiding place from the world
in which you've placed us for our benefit,
with its abundant gifts
and light burdens.

Forgive us the love we withhold
the much needed kind word put off
the unnecessarily angry word set free.

Forgive us our attachment to those things –
theories, habits, institutions,
which take more life from us or from others
than they give.

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:

cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your
binding and liberating Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord.

Amen.
