

Pentecost 4
17/6/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 2:18-28
Psalm 92
Mark 4:26-34

Going in circles

In a sentence:

What God, for love, has joined together – even Godself to us – let no one separate.

Looking as closely at 1 John, as we have been doing over the last couple of months, reveals just how *repetitive* it is. It's not long into the letter that we begin to think we've read something like this just a moment ago. There is an unmistakable *circularity* in the way John thinks and writes.

Yet this is not a going round and round in simple repetition. A closer approximation to John's style teaching is that of a helix – a circularity like that of a cork-screw: John moves around the same central point (or, more accurately now, *axis*), but always with different concepts and associations.

The axis is those particular fixed things central to his experience – the love of the Father, the identity of the crucified Jesus with the Son, the church community. This axis he relates to different concerns and consequences; these are how the circle 'moves' to become a different circle but still revolving around the same central axis: Now we talk about light and dark, now about sin and reconciliation, now about the love of God and the love of the world, now about community and division. Each cycle around the axis adds nuance and depth to our sense of the significance of the axis itself – the meaning of the relationship between the Father and Jesus, and between us and our neighbours, and the relationship between these relationships(!).

In today's reading the same thing is happening: the helix continues to wind around the relationship between human being and divine being, and this is extended now in terms of the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'abiding.'

It is the second concept – abiding – which I'd like to focus on today because 'abide' is a constant refrain through the letter and is especially useful for demonstrating how John seeks to hold all things together. ('Abide' appears a couple of dozen times in letters of John, although not always translated as 'abide' – sometimes as 'live,' and it can also mean 'remain;' we might get back to 'knowledge' another time). Today we've heard,

^{2.24} Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father.

^{2.27} As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.

^{2.28} And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.

Elsewhere in the letter we hear,

^{3.24a} All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them.

And,

^{4.16b} God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

A teaching, particular knowledge, abides in us. This makes possible an abiding in God. And acting according to that knowledge is the guarantee that God abides in us.

What becomes clear is that this not a set of *linear* connections, such that one must come before the other. There is nothing linear in John's thinking, to the extent that his arguments feel quite circular to us (consider from today's passage: ^{2.19} They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us). He holds belief and action so closely together that there is no other way to say it other than to go around and around in reiteration. When he considers the break-away group, it is not only that they first believed the wrong thing and then left; their very departure was just as much part of their false belief.

And so what is to us a 'doctrinal dispute' in John's community – whether the crucified Jesus is the divine Son – is no '*mere*' doctrinal dispute. There is no '*mere*' doctrine for John. All doctrine is implied action; all action implies doctrine. John says: believing 'this' looks like doing 'that'. Not doing 'that' is in fact believing something else. And so, for John, actions do not speak louder than words; actions *are* words and words *are* actions (it is perhaps this second part which is the surprise for us). Nothing speaks or enacts truth other than getting them *both* right.

Now, perhaps this all sounds just too complicated and difficult. Part of the reason for this is that modern thinking expects truth to be expressed differently than John expresses it. Even if we can see *what* he is doing, we are not well-placed culturally or intellectually to be moved by it.

But rather than try to unpack those cultural and logical differences we can cut through the hard knot if I suggest to you simply that John teaches this way because he is enraptured by the *beauty* of it all: the beauty of such movement in harmony, the beauty of balance which is not static and of motion which is not unstable. This is the beauty of a world thoroughly infused with God – inconceivable without God, for 'Jesus is the Son' – and the beauty of a God enveloping that world, inconceivable as doing anything else, for 'the Son is Jesus'. It is the beauty of the source of all things finding its end in us, and that end becoming a new source for all things.

For John, the truly beautiful is neither static nor theoretical. It is no mere object to thought; thought is as much subject to the beauty. Mere knowledge is not enough; the knowledge which matters will gather us up into the beautiful.

Or, more concretely, the beauty John sees is only beautiful if it is a life *lived*. A creed, a liturgy, a building cannot capture the beauty of God, although neither can it be captured without those things. An experience, a kindness, a sacrifice cannot capture the beauty of the world, although neither is it captured without such things.

God's life with us and our life with God are an abiding – a living, a remaining, in a kind of mutual orbit. This spinning of God and us around each other is at the heart of what John says. Perhaps we must sometimes freeze the motion in order to speak about the one or the other but then we are not speaking about them in their *liveliness*, but only in their isolation, like the isolation of a single image pulled from a strip of film.

All this is to say that Christian life is a kind of going-in-circles. The Christian community is properly a place where such talk and action, such being and doing, such hearing and speaking, such to-and-fro with God, are a 'making beautiful'.

So, John says to us,

^{2.24}Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵And this is what he has promised us, [this is] eternal life:

abiding in God as God abides in us (4.16)

Let us, then, do the beautiful: abide in God as God abides in us.

By way of response, a prayer of confession:

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

And yet...

Forgive us, Lord,
when we receive you as a silent thing,
and hear only our own thoughts about you.

Kyrie, Kyrie, Kyrie eleison;

Forgive us when
we claim to trust in you alone
but our actions speak of a different confidence.

...Christe, Christe, Christe eleison;

Forgive us when our confusion about such things
perpetuate the needs of others
and their own confusion and disorientation.

...Kyrie, Kyrie, Kyrie eleison.

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 Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord.

Amen.
