

Pentecost 7
8/7/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 3:18-24
Psalm 123
Mark 6:1-13

Greater than our hearts

*In a sentence:
Our lifeblood is not our blood, but God's very own*

‘...for God is greater than our hearts’

This is, in fact, all we need to hear this morning – God is greater than our hearts. But, alas, the preacher will not stop here! *That* this is all we need to hear is simple enough but *why* it might be all we need to hear is *not* simple because our hearts are not simple.

That this is so we see – *again* – if we read around this declaration in 1 John. It is a rare joy in reading this letter to find two sequential sentences such that the second clearly follows on from the first, and the same with the paragraphs. Circular logic and straight-out self-contradiction are part of John's theological method. When scholars strike a problem like this in an ancient text like 1 John, one temptation is to conclude that later editors have chopped and changed the text in order to give it more sense to their own readers. But for John the problem is not that someone got the pages of the original in the wrong order but that he is trying to say a simple thing – that God is greater than our hearts – in the middle of the complex reality that we are. And so he slips quickly from word to action and back again, from doctrine to ethics and back again, from the sin of the believer to her sinlessness and back again, from the commandment to believe in Jesus to the commandment to love each other and back again. This slippage occurs because each apparent ‘pole’ is as important as the other, and yet we can only do or think them one at a time and so risk skewing in favour of one against the other.

What binds all this together is that ‘God is greater than our hearts.’

What John means when he says this is not a matter of *scale*. What he is comparing is the *voices* which are God and our hearts. That is, ‘if your heart condemns you’ – if you find you cannot stand before God for whatever reason – *take* heart; God is not impressed by your heart-voice. It is *God's* voice which speaks what and who you are, and not your own. If our hearts condemn us – if we judge ourselves worthless – then God calls us to boldness before God, to lift up our heads, to open our mouths, and to be filled. We are empty indeed but with *this* God it is always emptiness as a precondition to being filled. Is this not what we declare every time we gather around the table: that we are empty and wait to be fed?

But then John goes on to say the *same* thing by saying the *opposite*: if our hearts do *not* condemn us, we have boldness before God. That is, if we *know* that we are filled not by ourselves but by God, *we are indeed filled*.

Our hearts, then, condemn us and do not condemn us, and this double-speak is the grounds for boldness before God. This only works – only makes sense – if, in the end, what matters is not we ourselves but God, or ourselves-in-God. Our righteousness and our condemnation are not a matter of what we do but of God's ‘doing to’ us.

This is not a theoretical matter, or mere gobbledegook. It touches upon the spirit in which we act. This is a liberating Spirit, because it enables a confidence not in ourselves and our ability to justify what we say and do but in the God whose defining feature is that he raises the dead – *you and me* – in every moment of our being, in each word and action. And so we do not *arrogate* that we are right in any word or action, for there is nothing to refer to for justification but *God's claim to be the one who justifies*.

What this means, or feels like, is what some Christians – beginning with St Paul – call a life lived in ‘fear and trembling’. This is not afraid-of-the-dark fear, but the recognition that nothing I do will impress God, nothing I do will change God’s opinion about me, and yet I must still do and be in the world *before God*. Right or wrong, Paul knew himself as belonging to God: Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, a heart set free or a self-condemning heart – in all of these are ways of being human which give *shape* but not *content* to our humanity before God.

God’s opinion about me is more weighty than anything I could lift up to him – even my heart. That weightiness is love expressed as a cross, *driving out* all fear. *We are* complex, and it is in this that normal fear resides: am I OK? Have I joined all (or enough!) of the dots? Will God accept me, or reject me, will *you* accept or reject me? The fear and trembling which is Christian existence is the refusal to know the answer to these questions, because the knowledge of good and evil is not ours to hold but God’s.

We must speak, must act, must determine and decide. But the greatness of God’s heart, and our uncertainty about our own, must qualify all of that. This matters for the spirit in which we design church buildings run mission outreach programs and order our liturgies. It matters for the spirit in which we make decisions about marriage and address the powers in our society. It matters for the spirit in which we define borders and manipulate economies. Some of these things, of course, are beyond *our* control but they are not beyond others’ control.

God is greater than our hearts: greater than all the desire or fear, belief or doubt, fullness or emptiness which our hearts might beat out. For our lifeblood is not *our* blood, but God’s very own, given that it might flow for and through us.

Filled in this way, our hearts ought not condemn us but simply hear the call to beat in a different rhythm – that of God’s own heart. And then we are to begin to live, boldly.

Let us, then, live.
