

Pentecost 11
5/8/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 4:13-16
Psalm 78
John 6:24-35

The spacious God

In a sentence

God does not have context but is a context

Believers generally have in common with unbelievers a sense of where God would be, if God were anywhere. What is held in common here is not the particular place or time of God, but the thought that God might be ‘there’ – anywhere – at all.

‘There-ness’ – a *location* – seems a sensible thing to propose about God. Our religious language is loaded with this assumption: God is ‘in heaven’. It doesn’t matter precisely where heaven is, only that it has an implied ‘there’ which matches our ‘here’. With more sophistication, we might say God is in the ‘future’ – a ‘there’ which matches here-and-now. Or, more lamentably, God might be in the past – yet another ‘there’ which is located in relation to *here*.

Of course, that God *is* somewhere is how *belief* tends to put it. *Unbelief* understands where God *might be* in the same way, and simply asserts that, in fact, God is not in any such place.

Yet, the real difference between belief and unbelief is not that belief insists that God *is* there and that unbelief insists that God *is not*. The difference between belief and unbelief is that one holds that God does not have a ‘where’, and the other holds that God must have. Perhaps it will come as a surprise that I say that it is *unbelief* that holds that God must be *somewhere*, to be ‘related’ to, if God is to be all. Belief – Christian, trinitarianly-informed belief – does not require God to be ‘anywhere’.

How can this be so? The problem with a God who is ‘somewhere’ is that such a God tends to be either too small or too big.

Such a God is too small because if God exists *in* a space, there must be space ‘around’ God – a not-God space. So if, as believers like to do, we were to ‘meet’ this God, it would be like meeting a friend in a café: indeed we meet, but neither of us *is* the café. The meeting *space* – the ‘café’ – is a kind of ‘neutral’ zone in which we and God meet; think of God meeting Adam and Eve in the Garden after the Apple Incident.¹ The difference between the believer and the unbeliever on this understanding is that the unbeliever knows that she can drink coffee on her own and that sometimes coffee is better that way. Whether God is ‘there’ or not becomes a matter of mood and taste.

This is not a God to be taken seriously, which is why unbelievers and believers alike do not. *Unbelievers* don’t take such a God seriously because moods come and go but taste is eternal, and they have no taste for God.

¹ It is noteworthy that the mythological presentation of God in a space (the Garden) takes place *after* the Apple.

Why *believers* don't take the small God-in-a-space seriously is seen in the way that this God seems to want to grow bigger, threatening to take up too much space. We feel this whenever we sense that we are in competition with God for our lives in the world. When we rationalise to ourselves why we should be able to do or say as we would like – despite what someone might tell us God requires – we seek to limit God to God's own proper space. Believers also find that coffee is often better enjoyed alone.

The God who is 'there' – the God 'to' whom we might relate at a place between ourselves and God – begins to look not much different from a questionable moral upbringing, a nagging conscience, a cultural formation which might have been different – an isolatable, dismissible thing.

But the properly Christian confession is that there is no space 'around' God. God does not have a *context*, has nothing by which to locate him. God, rather, *is* a context. God *has* no 'where;' God *is* a 'where'. And this brings us, *finally*, to our reading from 1 John this morning and once more to John's language of 'abiding.'

We noted John's interest in abiding a few weeks ago. We focussed then particularly on where *we* abide: the options we have to locate ourselves, and the call to rest in the present, in God. Our thinking this morning about the 'where' of God touches upon *God's* abiding: *Where* does God abide?

The only answer of interest to the church is that which John gives: *in us*.

God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ ...God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

God is not located abstractly in space or time, to go to or come away from as we or God choose. There is no Godless place from which God might be absent, or to which God might then become present. God is located in relation to us: where we are, there is God.

This is dangerous talk, of course, on account of the risk that we now turn God into what we are. This becomes not 'God is love' but 'love is God': how *we* love being how God loves. If we cordon off your community or bulldoze your homes, if we strand you on a distant island, or beat you, or limit your options for a full life, it is because God requires it, and this is God's love for you.

This is not the faith of the church. To say that God abides only in relation to us is not to say that whatever we manifest is the manifestation of God. But it is to say that we need a shift in the metaphors which dominate how we think about our relationship to God. The metaphor of God in a space is what gives us the notion that God 'sends' – sends the Son, sends the Spirit, sends the church in mission. This gives us the notion that there are places where God is not, and that God comes to meet us or we go to take God somewhere new. This is the possibility of the heresy against which John writes – that the world, the body of Jesus, is not a place God can inhabit.

But let's take up the thought from a moment ago – that God does not *have* a context but *is* a context. This is to say that God is not *in* a space but is, rather, *spacious*. God is not *in the world* somewhere; the world is *in God*.

It might not look that way, but this would change how we experience the world and what we understand the call of God to be. The world ceases to be a godless place; it is a place *in* God and so *inherently* Godly. And mission – being called to God and calling others to God – ceases to be about going to a place where God is not and bringing God there. Mission becomes ‘turning on the light’, that we might see what space it is which, in fact, we inhabit.

‘...this is the judgement,’ we hear in John’s gospel, ‘that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God’ (3.19-21).

Our deeds are done in God. Our lives are lived in God, whether they are yet capable of reflecting the divine light or not. We do not see God because God is not ‘there’ to be seen; we see *by* God. God is the eyes *by which* we see. These ‘eyes’ are the gift of God’s own Spirit, which speaks to us the meaning of Jesus, and so our very own meaning – who we are, where we are, the space we inhabit. This is much, much more than we have yet to see.

The call of the gospel – and its promise – is life in all its fullness: opening our eyes and conforming to our divine habitat, coming to be in the world as Jesus himself is – as light, as promise, as hope.

Let us, then, open our eyes to catch that quickening ray which is the light of God’s call and promise – this to God’s greater glory and our richer humanity. Amen.
