

Pentecost 17
16/9/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 116
Mark 8:27-33

The incarnation at Easter

In a sentence:

For God, incarnation is the easiest of things

Today's reading is, for many of us, a very familiar text.

And the text itself is about familiarity. The disciples report to Jesus who 'the people' understand him to be: 'They know about the prophets, and you are starting to look something like that.' Familiarity reads what is new and unfamiliar.

When the question of Jesus' identity is then put to the disciples themselves, Peter responds, 'I've been watching more closely. I know something about the Messiah, and you're beginning to look like that.' Again, familiarity reads what is new and unfamiliar, if now differently.

Then comes the truly unfamiliar and unexpected – the shock of Jesus' prediction of his fate, reinforced with his dismissal of Peter's objections as demonic.

This *is* unfamiliar and unexpected to *Peter* but, of course, some of *us* have heard it hundreds of times. None of us were shocked to hear Jesus confront Peter this morning. We can hear that Peter was shocked, but we cannot *share* his shock. We '*know*' that Jesus was right – at least, right that he would die – and we even have theories as to why this must be so. We cannot un-hear a story we have heard many times and be surprised when we hear it again.

This to recognise that it is almost impossible for a church which faithfully tells its central story not to *domesticate* that story – even become bored with it – simply because we have faithfully retold it and so know it very well.

And so this text becomes a very hard one to read; we know that we are supposed to be Peter in the exchange, and yet we know more than he does. This is the problem of our own familiarity with Jesus. If familiarities of 'the people' and of Peter blind them to who Jesus is, what do *our* familiarities blind us to?

In fact, there still is a shock waiting for us here. It is almost the opposite of what took Peter by surprise although it also has to do with the identity of Jesus. Peter's problem is, how can it be that the Messiah dies the death that we die? Our problem is, how can it be that the death of Jesus is *different* from the death of the rest of us? That is, how can *Jesus* be different from us?

We have no problem with Jesus dying. This is either because – as sceptics – we don't think him different from us or – as believers – we've already made some sense of this death. Our real problem today is that Jesus *lived*. That is, the offence for us is that one part of the world – the person of Jesus – could be *special* in this way: that *everything* could take its definition from *one* thing.

‘Specialness’ is offensive to us today – at least the depth of ‘special’ the church has said that Jesus is. This might be surprising but, despite all our contemporary talk about valuing what is different, all difference and specialness is quickly subsumed because true specialness would contradict everything we typically think about the world.

We do not allow ‘special’ in our thinking about nature – in our science. Special doesn’t fit in a world defined by natural ‘law’, because the notion of natural law was itself developed in no small part to exclude the special – the unpredictable breaking in of God into the mundane. If anything in the world appears ‘special’ – a purported miracle, or whatever – it is either held to be deception or that our theories are not yet comprehensive enough to account for the observation. Here it less that there is no such thing as a miracle than that miracles quite simply have no place to happen if the world is like this.

In a similar way, in our thinking about history, ‘special’ is only related to the shifting fortunes of power – now this one is special, now another – but each is really just another version of the other.

We do not allow that there could be something truly erratic, truly unpredictable and so new in history or in nature. And yet the Jesus of the gospels is portrayed in precisely this way.

This is to say that the shock in Jesus’s response to Peters ancient and modern is that God is both in-and-for the world and external-and-against it. This is the shock of the *incarnation* – that God and the world meet in this way in Jesus, without either stopping being what it is.

This seems contradictory, and impossible – and the impossibility of the incarnation is the point we usually emphasise.

Yet the incarnation was an *easy* thing, even if for us *conceptually* impossible on this or that way of thinking (as the ancient and modern Peters know). Despite what we’ve just said, to confess the incarnation is not to say that something ‘special’ happened, if by this we mean something which ultimately ought not to have happened. The incarnation is, in its own way, entirely ‘natural’ or ‘appropriate’ to how this God creates and relates to us. What we call the incarnation is ‘merely’ an affirmation or filling out of the creation itself: this is the sort of world we live in: one from which no part is beyond God’s reach, no part outside of God’s capacity to use it for God – even death itself.

Though Mark’s gospel is a whole other world than that of 1 John, they both orbit the same sun: that the crucified, very *human* Jesus is the presence of very *God* (‘God from God, Light from Light, very God from very God’): the home of God is with mortals (Revelation 21.3).

This means that what we consider natural and familiar now comes to be an entirely new thing. And *this* means that our reception of the world, our approach to the people around us changes. It becomes natural to act *unnaturally*: to love the stranger, to help those who have no claim on our help, to give to those who have done nothing to deserve it, to forgive what could not before have been forgiven.

That Jesus lived and died as he did – that his was a life defined by *giving* – is not only what he did because he was the Messiah. It is also that he is the Messiah because that is what he does: he gives, in life and in death, and in this way he is the place at which God meets us and gives us our very being.

Jesus 'becomes' like us in life and death that we might become like him in life and death; this is unexpected love which makes us unexpected lovers.

Let us, then, open ourselves to how God would charge the world with himself, and live and love as God has done – to our greater humanity and God's greater glory.

Amen.
