

Advent 2
9/12/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 1:68-79
Luke 3:1-6

God's crooked way

'The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.'

And what was that word? In fact, today's reading cuts out before we hear from the Baptist himself (next week!) but his preaching is characterised with a few lines borrowed from Isaiah: first,

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'.

And then,

'Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

What we might miss here is that these two parts are in different verbal 'moods': 'Prepare' is in the imperative ('Do this') but 'every valley shall be filled' is in the indicative (what is or will be happening). This matters because Isaiah is not saying that God's approach is dependent upon *our* preparing the way. The valleys *shall be* filled, the mountains and hills *shall be* made low. Whatever efforts we might make in this regard, only God can *guarantee* that it happens: God will prepare the way for God.

This is the kind of thing theological types – your preacher included – are likely consider to be a lovely little twist in the text. Yet, having shifted our hearing of Isaiah from an actionable imperative (which would at least keep us busy) to a promised indicative (which we might only need to wait for), we then have to deal with a troubling fact. For we have to say that, on the face of it, there is no way in which this filling, levelling, straightening or smoothing can be said actually to have taken place. Even if we allow what we must – that Isaiah speaks here *metaphorically* and not about Grand Canyons or Rocky Mountains high – there is little in the way of Jesus which is smooth and straight – metaphorically or otherwise. After an enthusiastic initial reception he quickly meets with opposition, and we know very well where he ends: precisely *not* a levelling or a smoothing but a raising up on what is crooked and rough, and a laying-down in a valley as deep as the grave of a God.

And so we are shifted suddenly to the thought that Isaiah's valley, mountain, crookedness and roughness are metaphors of the cross of Jesus. It is the cross with which God must deal in his approach to us – even before Jesus' cross has even appeared on the horizon. It is this which God guarantees will be overcome.

How can this be?

On a simpler metaphorical hearing of Isaiah, the valleys and mountains and challenging paths represent obstacles in us to be put aside so that God might draw near (or, slightly better, that God might put aside in order to draw near). Yet this is to imply that the human being is not one but two things – an *inner* self which is accessible apart from an *outer* self with its better and worse commitments and enthrallments, its history of things done and suffered – all that might have been different, and better.

But God knows us better than this. The valleys and the mountains and the crookedness and roughness which get between us and God have not been swept away in any simple sense because they *are* us. They are not *between* God and the true us; they are not obstacles around which we could navigate (or God has to navigate) in order that the real God can meet face to face with our real selves.

These things *are* us: we are what we do. What the Gentile does to the Jew (and vice-versa!), what the free does to the slave, the male to the female; what the border patrol does to the asylum seeker, the coloniser does to indigenes, the rich to the poor; what the faithful do to their God – these are not ‘the devil made me do it’ moments, as if I and my actions were two separate realities. This is us and the powers to which we are subject bound in a symbiosis of such intimacy that the life and death of the one would be the life and death of the other. To lay the mountain low and straighten the crooked way – in the simple metaphorical sense of setting aside the obstacles between us and God – this would be to *end* us, for there would be no ‘us’ left.

And so the obstacles stay in place and become manifest in the cross. The cross, then, is not an accident – something which just ‘happened’ to happen when God came. It is *unavoidable* without being either intended or desired or needed by God for salvation’s sake. The cross is God staying his hand, allowing the depth of the valleys and the height of the mountains to continue because they are what make us *us*.

And now we come to the sense in which Isaiah speaks the gospel of God’s way in the world. The valleys and mountains and byways are shown in fact not to be obstacles to God’s passage but simply features in a landscape in which God chooses to dwell. The salvation which ‘all flesh’ will see (Isaiah) is that we are saved as we are, here and now, valleys and mountains and crooked and rough ways that we are.

We hear more from John next week about what that salvation *looks* like, what life with such a crooked God looks like. But for now two final things, first a liturgical illustration of the point and, second, a poetic summation.

All we have been thinking this morning is why each week we take a sign of death as a sign of life – nourishment in bread and wine said to be body broken and blood poured out. It is ghastly imagery but we persist with it because the valleys and the mountains are not wiped away, the cross is not removed or forgotten. For these are part of us. The *only* question is whether such things divide us from God. The sacrament uses these things as signs of the *gospel* to say that they *do not* separate us, that they are no barrier. This is the way in which the valleys and mountains between us and God are overcome – they become signs of the power of God. And so this is what we mean when we declare that the kingdom and the power and the glory are of *this* God: *nothing* separates us from the love of God in Jesus Christ the Son.

And finally, the poetic summation: as I reflected on Isaiah's word in our reading this morning, the word 'crooked' reminded me of a poem which, I realised, slightly modified would serve well to summarise what I've been trying to say about the God who deals somewhat crookedly with us, reckoning as righteous what clearly is not, calling straight and smooth what clearly is not. For those of you who would like to check the poem without my changes, the original poet is Mother Goose.

There was a crooked God, who walked a crooked mile,
Who found a crooked people and spent a crooked while;
They found a crooked staff and the crooked God unfurled
The crooked way a crooked God would save a crooked world.
