

Epiphany 4  
3/2/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 1:4-10  
Psalm 71  
Luke 4:21-30

God comes to us, to save another

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*In a sentence:*

My neighbour is the shape of my salvation

Jesus stands before the good people of Nazareth and tells them: I have not come for you.

Things had started well: ‘all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth’ (v.22). But they have missed the point – not that we could blame them – and Jesus goes on the attack. First, we hear two proverbs as direct challenges thrown to the congregation: ‘Doctor, cure yourself’ and ‘no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s own town’. The first names the people’s not unreasonable expectation that Jesus would perform among them acts of power he had been said to have worked elsewhere. The second then accuses them of being unable to receive him.

As confronting as this might have been, the clincher is the two biblical stories Jesus retells. In both cases great prophets from Israel’s past – at times of great need in Israel – bring God’s healing power not to Israel but to Gentiles. And the crowd goes ballistic – or intends to – with Jesus!

But *why* does Jesus go on the attack in the first place? There is not here the holy righteousness of, say, his attack on the money-changers in the temple, or his anger against the attitudes of the Pharisees and scribes. This is not an attack on a moral failure – something the people had or hadn’t done.

Jesus’ assault is not on what the people had *done* but rather on what the people *were* – as the good people of Nazareth. Jesus accuses the people as a *class*. They have, in fact, not done anything yet – right or wrong – other than expect that what Jesus had done elsewhere he might also do at home. And so their initial response to him is not unbelief but actually what we might even call faith.<sup>1</sup> The expectation of the congregation seems to be that they will receive from God through Jesus and yet, in a manner seemingly uncalled for, Jesus tells them that not they but others will be blessed.<sup>2</sup>

What are we to make of this? Of the four evangelists, Luke is the most overtly ‘political’ to modern ears. It is Luke who most uncomfortably confronts the comfortable with what has been called God’s ‘preferential option for the poor’. And the class distinctions which Luke draws are unqualified. It is not a matter of *some* of the religious leaders having lost the plot, or *some* of the poor and outcast having received God’s favour. Rather, we hear from Luke (chap 6): blessed are the poor; blessed are the

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<sup>1</sup> Note the difference here from the way in which Mark (6.1-6) and Matthew (13.54-58) tell the story, attributing the few works Jesus does in Nazareth to a lack of faith.

<sup>2</sup> Note also, the issue is not really one of inclusion or exclusion – except for the possibility that the good people of Nazareth might themselves be excluded (some commentators seeing here an objection to the inclusion of the Gentiles).

hungry; blessed are the weeping; and woe to the rich, those with full stomachs, and so on. There is no careful distinction between those who are poor because of the injustices of an economic system and those who are poor because of their own stupidity, and no distinction between those who have full stomachs because they have taken advantage of others and those who have full stomachs because of long and hard work.

The obvious danger in this is that individuals are treated according to how we've sorted them, according to their 'class'. But a Muslim is not, thereby, a terrorist; a poor person is not, thereby, righteous; a politician is not, thereby, unreliable; and to be sitting in the congregation at Nazareth when Jesus speaks is *not, thereby*, to be ruled out of God's favour.

And yet this is what Jesus says: as a group, these will be overlooked, for the blessing of others. We could only avoid this conclusion by attributing what he says to the unbelief of the people, but the text itself – in Luke's account – *doesn't* do this (even if Matthew and Mark *do*). It is *not* that they have not believed, for they *have* been impressed by him. It is rather that they *are* the good, religious people of Israel.

Yet, while there exists here the very serious dangers of racism and classism, addressing the good folk of Nazareth in this way (as a whole) and contrasting them with the Gentiles as a whole enables a central aspect of the gospel to be put in the starkest of terms.

It is easy and tempting – now, as then – to focus on the justification and healing of the individual, or on the class of individuals, separate from other individuals and classes. This leads to a focus on personal or communal righteousness, *individualised*. Here I would be saved *independently* of you if, say, I am the righteous Jew and you the unclean Gentile. Or, *within* the class I, as the righteous Jew am saved independently of you, the unrighteous Jew. This leads to that kind of judgementalism which is one person or group standing divided from and over against another.

And this is what makes the offence taken by the congregation is understandable: Are we not the keepers of the tradition? Are we not the observers of the rules? Are we not the donors to the cause? The language of 'fairness' and the *earning* of blessing creeps in.

But earned blessings are always a saving *out* of the world: isolation and insulation from that which is not saved. Salvation for what we have earned is always finally salvation in solitude – salvation into aloneness, for I may be the only one who has earned it.

The blessing of God is *never* for our isolation, even if we think that is what we want or need. The blessing of God – a blessing which is not earned – is always reconciling, and so always communal. It levels and equalises, without making the same. The love of God comes to the chosen people, that those who are not chosen may know the love of God.

This is a difficult lesson. Not the synagogue nor the church are safe-place refuges, and neither is anywhere 'outside' these communities. It is perhaps too difficult a lesson even for Luke himself, who doesn't include in his gospel the story which best complements Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth – that rather uncomfortable account of the Syrophenician woman's meeting with Jesus. That story, found in Mark (7.24-30) and Matthew (15.21-28), has Jesus saying to a Gentile what he says here to the synagogue – I have not come for you: 'it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs'. The difference – and perhaps the irony in Luke's omission – is that she *accepts* this order of things ('but bread has crumbs!'), *and so* receives the blessing Jesus was going to deny her. This is just what the Nazarenes do not do.

Jesus comes to us today to declare: 'I have come to you in order to go to another. I have come not that you might be blessed, elevated and separated from the rest of the world. I have come to move beyond, to extend to, to open up. I have come to reconcile the Jew and the Gentile, the rich and the poor, the slave and the free. Your salvation begins today, in your midst, in this messily class-ified world as it is; there is no plucking-out-of the world or a leaving-behind-of those you might think I do not love. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news, to announce liberty and a new vision, and to proclaim the Lord's favour.'

The Lord's favour is without bounds. If it were not so, we who imagine that God's favour is ours would be without hope or salvation, because our imagination is just not broad enough. God comes to us to declare that he is leaving to bless our neighbour, and he declares to our neighbour just the same thing. It is only if this is so that we may speak with any sense of grace which is not reward and reconciliation in spite of what we have done: that we might be blessed through *someone else* being blessed. This is what it means truly to give and to receive, whether in the case of the grace of God, or a helping hand.

Jesus says, Your neighbour is the shape of your salvation. Let us, then, live as if that were the case: as if giving were receiving.

For the good news of the gospel – that God can turn even what divides us from each other into the very means of our salvation – thanks be to God.

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