

Lent 3
24/3/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:7

Psalm 63

Luke 13:1-9

On not dying too soon

In a sentence:

Death can kill us before we die; this is the 'unrepentant' life

I have wondered for some time whether there might be something to be said for an occasional sermon which reflected on 'the art of dying'.

As morbid as that might seem as a theme, reflections on death – properly *Christian* reflections, at least – are not about dying in itself, but about life and its relationship to those deaths in our lives we can't avoid, regardless of how hard we try to forget that they are already with us, or are coming.

Knowing what death is, and where it is, are important skills in the art of dying, and something of this knowledge is treated in this morning's readings.

From Qohelet, we've heard a fairly straightforward exhortation: Make the most of it, because you're going to die in the end.

If nothing else, Qohelet is starkly realistic about the fact of death. The offence of death, its ungraspability ('vanity') and its unpredictability (more vanity) are close to the centre of his thinking. Life is vanity, and then you die.

In this, Qohelet relentlessly strips away any illusions we might allow ourselves about death as we go about our seemingly lively lives. But this is not in order to glory in death. As we have heard, he still holds that it is better to be a living dog than a dead lion.

Qohelet would simply have us know what death is and where it is. So far as he can see, death has the last word. This being the case, he is concerned to know, *What is* that word – what is spoken – and *when*, precisely, is it uttered?

There is also a lesson about death in the gospel reading we have heard today, although it is less straightforward than it might first seem.

Jesus reminds the crowds of two recent news bulletins which must have horrified them in the same way we've been horrified by the recent outrage in Christchurch. The question is put: do you imagine that those people died in that way because they were worse sinners than anyone else? No, he says.

At this point, Jesus is in close accord with Qohelet, such as in what we heard from him last week:

'There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous (8.14).'

Contradicting one stream of conventional wisdom thinking, Jesus and Qohelet say that we cannot conclude from when and how someone dies whether they were righteous, or not. *Death is neither a sign of life nor a sign even of deathliness.*

But then Jesus seems to contradict this: ‘but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’ On the one hand, ‘perishing as they did’ is not a matter of repentance; on the other hand, it seems that Jesus then declares that it will be. This latter seems also to be the point of the parable of the unfruitful fig tree.

The only resolution here revolves around what might be meant by ‘perishing as they did’. The point would seem to be not that they died, but that they died *unrepentant*. Sin is not the *cause* of their death but *colours* it.

The warning, then, is not that buildings will fall on – or bullets will rain down upon – the unrepentant, but how tragic it is when death comes to the unrepentant. To ‘perish as they did’ would be to perish not knowing that there is something of which to repent, that there is something to lay aside, that there is a deathliness already in us, diminishing us.

One way of hearing such an account of an unrepentant death is as a call to ‘ticket to heaven’ repentance: ‘Repent now, lest you step out from this place and fall under a bus’. This is not what Jesus speaks of here, as large as the idea has been in the history of evangelism, as if sin has relevance only to what happens when we die and not to what is happening while we are still alive.

Qohelet helps again here. Unrepentance in Qohelet’s terms is not to understand our lot. It is to live vainly, emptily, oriented towards things which, in the end, do not really matter, which cannot be relied on and so which turn our lives into a chasing after wind. It is, in effect, to have died before death comes (cf. Ecclesiastes 7.17). It is for death’s last word to have been uttered too soon. The unrepentant life carries death with it, is death’s grip on us before we have died.

There is a poignancy in the illustrations Jesus uses here. A building is going to fall on him. Even more suggestively, his blood will also be mixed with that of the sacrifices.

If we imagined it were possible to be open minded about the moral meaning of the crucifixion, we’d have to say with Qohelet that there is nothing in the manner of Jesus’ death to tell us whether he was righteous or unrighteous, any more than Jesus allowed such a reading of those who died under the tower and under Pilate. To the dispassionate observer, Jesus just dies.

But the church is not open-minded here, for we consider the cross in the peculiar light of the resurrection. This is a peculiar light because it shines only on the cross. If that light makes us reconsider Jesus’ death, it makes us reconsider also his *life*: that he continued to do and to say and to be in the same way regardless of how much larger the possibility of a crucifixion loomed.

This was not a matter of ‘necessity’, in the sense that he ‘must’ die according to our traditional atonement theories. Jesus continues along the path on which he began because to turn aside from the likely outcome of a crucifixion would be to die before the building actually falls. This is the unrepentant life he calls us to turn from.

What then does repentance look like? It depends on what deaths we are already dying. But we get a general notion from Qohelet. His counsel this week – to enjoy the days of youth – may seem to some here to come a little late, but his point is what we emphasised on Ash Wednesday: it is vanity not to see that death comes, the ultimately vain, ungraspable thing: ‘all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again’ (3.20), vanity of vanities.

But it is vanity also to try to calculate death, and so let it darken the day before the night comes. To live in death’s shadow is not to live. It is to die too soon. This we heard in a different way last week:

for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun. (8.15)

The vanities of life – the misty vapours of chance and possibility, of work and reward, of life and death, the gamble on righteousness, the contradictions of justice – must not diminish the best that a human life could be, in a time and place.

In this sense, we might dare to say that Jesus on the road to Jerusalem is a life *enjoyed*.

Part of the art of dying is to set death in its proper place. When we do this, as Jesus did, everything else which happens – even our perishing – is life.

The lively kingdom of God draws near to displace the kingdoms of death; repent, then, and believe the good news.
