

Good Friday
19/4/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14

Psalm 31

Luke 23:13-33

Chasing the wind – the vanity of the crucifixion

In a sentence:

God makes the cross of Jesus into the unifying time of our lives.

'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die...'

With that confronting observation begins Qohelet's famous account of what the world is like. It is an account of what is 'the case' with the world. We live in a world in which it seems that there *is* a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. People get married or are crucified, go shopping or get gunned down while at prayer – just as a matter of fact. Seeing that the world is like this does not in any sense *justify* this way of things. Qohelet only *describes* the way of things: the world as we experience it with up-times and down-times.

And he also does not do precisely what *we* are immediately tempted to do on hearing his poem, and more than tempted: Qohelet doesn't ask the question, What time is it, now? We wonder, Is now the time for birth or death, for planting or for plucking up, for killing or for healing, for mourning or for dancing, time to defend or time to surrender? Is it a time to buy or to sell, to insure or to risk? It is a time to tighten or to liberate, a time to pay our debts or to borrow more? Questions like these are implicit in pretty much everything which appears on the pages of our newspapers or in dinner-table deliberations, indeed in the whole of politics at every level: *What is the time?* We can look forward to a lot of time-telling in the coming weeks of the election campaign...

To ask about the time is to ask about the responses required of us. The question about the times implies an 'ought', behind which always lurks some god or another, some sense for the order of things, or for the eternal (cf. 3.11). Our attempts to connect the times with eternity are what Qohelet elsewhere characterises as 'chasing after wind': the felt need to know where we are and how to act accordingly. This is in order to catch the elusive wind, in order to achieve the good and the right, in order to align ourselves to the true nature of things.

In various ways, Herod, Pilate and the religious authorities take a reading of the times. When they determine that it is a time to kill, it is not out of moral deficiency. So far as they can see, it is the *right* thing to do. Whether it's Herod placating the Romans, Pilate placating the crowd or the religious authorities placating God, it is time to 'pluck up': 'the wood is dry,' toss it on the fire.

The crucifixion of Jesus is a reading and response to history with its times for this and times for that. As unpleasant as it is, it is time to kill, time to die. Sometimes we feel we can do no other. *Deciding* this – reading the times and acting accordingly – is how we seek to catch the wind. The crucifixion of Jesus, from this perspective, is no different from every other crucifixion, from every other choice for death. It is a calculation to catch the wind, to align ourselves to the order of things, to keep us safe. It is the ‘right’ thing to do.

All of this is to say that the church does *not* gather today or any other day to remember a *crucifixion*. Crucifixions are what happen *in* time – when the time is ‘right’ for such horrors, when the times ‘demand’ them. There have been thousands and millions of crucifixions and similar atrocities and tragedies.

We gather today not to recall a crucifixion but rather to contemplate ‘the cross’. The crucifixion of Jesus is just one more event in time but the cross of Jesus is not a mere time-bound event. The cross is not ‘in’ time but rather, as the hymn goes, the cross ‘towers o’er the wrecks of time’. Because of the peculiar light of Easter which shines back on Jesus’ crucifixion, the church sees in the cross of Jesus something which *exceeds* the ups and downs of history.

‘The cross’ is the crucifixion of Jesus taken to a whole other level. At this level, the distinctions we draw between life and death, between building and destroying, between love and hate, between peace and war, are blurred. The crucifixion, as something which ‘happened to happen’ is one half of these couplets and not the other; the crucifixion is death, destruction, hate, war.

But the cross is not just one half of these couplets, it is *both* halves. The godlessness of crucifixion becomes the glory of the divine Son; the sacrifice *we* make to placate God becomes *God’s* offering to reconcile us; the body we break becomes the body we are destined to be part of; the death we determine is necessary becomes the life God gives not out of necessity but as freely offered gift.

The world of many times – the world of anxiety-inducing oscillations of up-times and down-times – is a vale of tears. ‘Weep not for me,’ says Jesus; ‘Weep for yourselves, because you cannot tell the time. If they do this when the wood is green, what will they do when it is dry?’

This is the *pathos* in Good Friday: we cannot tell the time, else we would not have crucified the Lord of glory. This is mere crucifixion. All we can see here is death – a time to die.

The surprise is that the *gospel* in Good Friday is that God cannot tell the time, either. And so in God’s hands death can become a means of life, sin can become the shape of forgiveness, unbelief can open the path to faith. This is the *cross*. It is the word of the psalmist this morning: My times, O LORD – whatever they are – are in your hands, and this is enough (31.15).

The cross is liberation from the vicissitudes of time. A God who cannot tell the time, but who is truly God, is ready for anything.

The crucifixion of Jesus, as a reading of the signs of times, and as an attempt to save ourselves from each other and from God, is a mere vanity. We do not catch the wind.

But with a God who cannot tell the time, even our failure here is enough. God makes the cross of Jesus into the time of our lives. We do not catch the wind, but it catches us.

And, if we will but

spread our wings,

see

how we

will fly.
