

Easter Day
21/4/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Ecclesiastes 8:6-8

Psalm 118

John 20:1-18

The wind blows where it wills – the vanity of the Christ

In a sentence:

The risen Jesus only confounds us because Jesus in his entirety confounded us

The stark world of Qohelet, the teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes, is not much different from our own, except in the brutal honesty with which he receives it.

Central to his account of life ‘under the sun’ has been the linked notions of ‘vanity’ and ‘chasing after wind’. On a first, fourth and tenth reading, these are clearly negative categories.

Yet reading him as we have – with the set gospel for each Sunday – they have emerged also with surprising positive connotations, even with significance for illuminating the gospel and the very character of God. On the first of these reflections on Qohelet I half-seriously tossed out the notion that bringing him into dialogue with the gospel might lead us to dare to speak of ‘the vanity of the cross’ which, by any other accounting, could only be impiety.

And yet that is where we have ended up – on Friday the vanity of the crucifixion and, today, the vanity of the Christ. What is crucial – literally, what ‘cru-x-ial’, ‘of the cross’ (Latin *crux*: ‘cross’) – here is that for Qohelet, vanity is less a matter of vain emptiness and closer the literal meaning of the Hebrew, ‘vapour’ or ‘mist’. It is ‘ungraspability’ – pertaining to things which cannot be comprehended. The negative sense of this is the futile attempt to *grasp* the ungraspable world in pleasure, in wisdom or in work, in calculation or scheming.

But beyond this is a *positive* ungraspability: the very mystery of the world as *God’s* world, and so of God Godself. All that is and happens comes from God but it is not comprehensible *how* that is the case. *God* is just, and justifies, but the *world* is not and does not. Yet this remains God’s world, and we are given to live in it. This is ungraspability as a characteristic of the God-and-world thing itself. It cannot be denied, but just *what* and *how* it is cannot be said.

Something similar happens with ‘chasing after wind’. Negatively, this is the comic image of someone actually trying to catch the wind. But, *positively*, there is something at the heart of what we are which *causes* us to grasp after the wind, however comic that must be. We heard from Qohelet on Friday that God has put knowledge in us – the King James Version says, ‘he hath set the world in their heart, *so that* [none] can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end. (3.11). Chasing after wind is the necessary yet impossible thing: the felt need to grasp the ungraspable world and its ungraspable God.

It is, perhaps, not for nothing that the book of Ecclesiastes is framed by the compounded ‘vanity of vanities’ (1.2; 12.8): the world is ungraspable, and yet what else do we do but seek to grasp it? Vanity for vanity. Qohelet has to affirm and deny at the same time.

We have heard this morning of Mary Magdalene, left behind in the garden by the tomb. Here she encounters – but does not recognise – the risen Jesus. It's tempting – and typical – to imagine that grief obscures her vision, that she does not recognise Jesus because her eyes are filled with tears and the world is just a blur. But John doesn't write history like this; psychology and physiology and physics – as we think about them – are nothing here. Mary not recognising Jesus is about *him*, not about her: he *cannot* be seen directly; he is 'vanity': vapour, mist, ungraspable, abluor.

The world is turned upside down not by vision but by a *word*: 'Mary'. She is caught by the wind, and then comes the recognition: 'Rabbouni', or, Teacher (perhaps only coincidentally one of the translations English Bibles use for the name 'Qohelet'...).

This is not yet what we might call 'conversion'. Mary has heard and – now in *that* sense – sees something, but she has not grasped what has happened. She feels the wind, but has not grasped him. And there's a sense in which she cannot: 'Do not hold onto me', Jesus tells her. It seems to *her* possible to grasp the risen Jesus – is he not just there, in reach? It is in this way that she 'feels' the wind.

But he resists. And this is not a 'cringe'. Jesus does not fear her touch, as if she would contaminate him. And he is not in some way 'charged', that he might wound her if she touched him. 'Do not hold me' is 'you cannot hold me'. Ungraspability – the best of Qohelet's 'vanity' – is a characteristic of the risen Jesus and what he brings: 'No one has power over the wind to restrain it' (8.8).

This is not a 'mystical' thing – Jesus is not now special in a way that he was not before. This risen Jesus is the same Jesus she knew before, and the revelation in the garden is that Mary did *not* really know him before, as he might yet be known.

The story of the resurrection typically seems to us to present the problem of a violation of the times, to recall what we heard from Qohelet on Friday. The report of the resurrection troubles us because the time for living is over, and now death has its time: for everything there is a season.

We cannot come fruitfully to the resurrection from this perspective. It is sheer violation and is excluded by the prior conviction that time – or nature – can only unfold in one way, from a living Jesus to a dead one. We can imagine that there was a Jesus who said and did what is reported. We can imagine him being crucified. There are times for such things. But the risen Jesus eludes us, for *such* a risen Jesus is not so much ungraspable as impossible. If we *start* with a time for every purpose under heaven, we cannot get to the resurrection.

But the gospel itself makes a different case: it is not the times which give Jesus his possible shapes but Jesus who gives shape to the times. If, as the gospels assert, it was the same Jesus now risen who yesterday was dead and the day before still alive – then the dead Jesus and the once-Jesus before the cross are everything the risen Jesus is. *There is no distinction*: in the cradle, on the cross and under the crown as risen lord (cf. the Christmas carol, TIS 321), Jesus is the same miraculous thing. Incarnation at Christmas and Resurrection at Easter are separated only by that ticking of a clock which separates one happening from another. Time does not bind them, they are the bounds of time.

To say, then, ‘Jesus is risen’ is only to say ‘the Word became flesh’. But the ‘only’ is the clincher, the shock of Jesus’ ungraspability by Mary, or by us. ‘The Word become flesh’ seems to most believers to be easy in comparison to ‘Jesus is risen’. Yet there the great ‘Christmas-y’ prologue to John’s gospel means nothing without Mary’s confusion, her seeing that what is in front of her and cannot quite be grasped was always in front of her. It has now simply been displaced a little in time.

The ungraspability of Jesus-as-the-Christ – and now we dare to say, the ‘*vanity*’ of the Christ – is not his waft-y nature as a risen body or spirit. It is that he was *ever* the very presence of God, from the very first. What Mary thought she had seen before was just a *shimmer* on the surface of the real substance of Jesus. Now she is confronted with him as he has always been, and the difference between then and now is the difference between death and life.

‘You cannot hold on to me,’ the wind cannot be restrained. And yet this is *good* news because *not* holding, not grasping onto, not chasing after, yields all the gospel: Jesus goes where we cannot go, and the effect is that all that is his becomes ours: ‘my Father and *your* Father, my God and *your* God.’ The not-grasping of Jesus brings Jesus’ own eternity as our own.

And so Mary herself will begin to shimmer, and we with her. Those who are in such an ungraspable Christ are beginning to take flight.

This is the thought with which we ended on Friday: to be caught up by the unrestrained wind which is Jesus, is to fly. We will end the service today with the same thought from Charles Wesley,

Soar we now where Christ hath led,
following our exalted head;
made like him, like him we rise,
ours the cross, the grave, the skies.

Jesus is risen.

Life begins to shimmer.

Time being renewed so, there is nothing better to do, Qohelet tells us, than to eat and drink, and enjoy.
