

Pentecost
9/6/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 11:1-9

Psalm 104

Acts 2:1-12

John 14:8-17

On not being religious

In a sentence:

Our calling is not to religion or spirituality but to a reconciled humanity, the gift and glory of God

‘God’ is probably the most useless word in the Christian vocabulary.

I mention this only because this morning I want to lead us into a reflection on the second and third most useless words among our faith-words: ‘Spirit’ and ‘religion.’

The uselessness of these necessary words is in that they are so compromised by common use that they are not – by themselves – able to point to what we hope they might point to.

‘Religion’ is, these days, a dirty word. There’s the friendly neighbour who believes in God (or something godlike) ‘but I’m not religious’. By this she means that she is not overbearing in her beliefs, is not likely to try to impose them on anyone, or is not into churchy prescriptions for how to pray or worship. Here ‘religion’ is merely an unappealing way of approaching God.

Then there’s the larger scale aversion to religion on account of its apparent capacity to stir strong emotion and even violent behaviour. This is religion as potentially dangerous. The danger is particularly present when religious fervour does not correspond to other fervours – when the wider community or the nation as a whole is not religious in the same way and so religious conviction is divisive of the whole.

The divisive dimension of religious conviction is one cause of a more subtle and so much less obvious sense in which ‘religion’ functions as a category *in contrast* to ‘secular.’

It is in this use that the word ‘religion’ becomes particularly useless – or worse than useless – for Christian attempts to make sense of its faith to itself and to the wider community.

When we hear the word ‘religion’ *in contrast to the secular* we are instantly made to think of a reality smaller than the whole: the religious *within* the secular. Whatever a modern western liberal society understands itself to be, it is not as a ‘religious’ reality but as a ‘secular’ one. The sphere of ‘religion’ sits somewhere *within* the larger sphere of secularity.

‘Religion,’ then, and ‘spiritual’ interests, mark us off from each other at a level below the overarching realities we have in common.

And now we come to our texts from this morning – in particular Genesis 11 and Acts 2. The relationship between the readings themselves is that one is the answer to the other. In the mythical story of the Tower of Babel, human division arises from God's response to the attempt to overstep the proper boundaries of human existence. Not content to be named by God, the people seek instead 'to make a name for themselves' and build a tower up to heaven. God responds by scattering humankind, confusing language, and so setting in place the very divisions which such things as religion seem to embody and reinforce so effectively for us.

In contrast, the story of the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost relates a miraculous overcoming of these divisions of humankind. The preaching of the apostles strangely bypasses the natural divisions of language: though they preach in their own native tongue, the apostles are heard by people from many lands in their own languages. The confused babble of Babel becomes the clear speech of Pentecost. (Just in passing, this event is not 'speaking in tongues' – *glossolalia*. Glossolalia, St Paul remarks, in fact brings confusion and requires translation, the opposite of the Pentecost experience; cf. 1 Corinthians 14).

But this is to say that the Pentecost experience – as a 'spiritual' or 'religious' event – precisely does not correspond to divisions in human society. It breaks those divisions down. If, as its critics argue, religion represents and reinforces human division, then the gift of the Spirit of Christ is an *anti*-religious event. Perhaps the only positive way we could put it (in contemporary parlance) would be to say that that Pentecost is a truly *political* event, in the sense that it overcomes human division to establish a human city or *polis* in which all speak a common language.

Pentecost does not, then, make the already religious even more so by injecting a more potent Spirit and, thereby, exacerbating the differences between us with even more religious fervour. Historically there has certainly been plenty of that but Pentecost is the possibility that political differences might be dissolved, not aggravated. The peace and human unity today's vocal critics of divisive religion strive for is in fact already there in the events of Pentecost.

This is to say, then, that Christians are neither religious nor spiritual people, in the sense in which those words are usually heard. This is the reason 'religious' and 'spirit' belong on our register of useless words, however necessary they might seem.

The pathos of all this, of course, is that it is impossible for Christianity *not* to be 'a' religion in a secular world, not to be a pursuit of 'spirit' in a material world. The wider world cannot comprehend this, and neither can the church most of the time. How can it be true that such a small part of the whole could be anything more than just a part? How could what we do here on a Sunday morning – or every morning, afternoon and night, if we wanted – be crucial for everything else?

The thing about the divisions in human society is that they are always matters of the past. The Babel myth captures this for us: we are divided now because there was a point at which we parted company and that parting has remained insurmountable. The Babel story locates the cause in human pride and divine correction (we would have to say, divine grace) both of which continue, but it is history which divides us from each other. The Pentecost story looks like this as well, in that it is also in the past and looks like the energy behind another *separation* – that which opened between synagogue and church, another 'making a name for ourselves'.

But while the Pentecost story (not unlike the election of Israel itself) *enters our imagination* as an historical event and then quickly becomes our *past*, it *brings a content* which concerns our *future*. The community which concerns itself with *this spirit* looks forward to a politics like the Day of Pentecost, and not back to the beginning which makes it distinctive from other communities. The religion which springs from this orientation is not a religion of withdrawal into a separate identity springing from past events. The religion of this spirit points toward its own coming irrelevance, when the vision it has been given is realised.

Christian faith is concerned with the strange dynamic of remembering our future. As a 'remembering', we recall and retell things which have already happened. But what is remembered – election, cross and resurrection, the creation of the church with the gift of the Spirit – these are a promise of what is yet to come.

We live less *from* a particular historical religious and spiritual impetus than *towards* the future that impetus imprints on us. 'What does all this mean?' ask the amazed crowds. In contemporary parlance, what it means is that when the Spirit of this God comes, there is neither religion to separate us nor the secular to hold us together. There is just the Spirit, and just us – God 'all in all' – united in understanding and amazed because of it.

We might finish simply, then, with a prayer: that the church which God created by the gift of God's own unifying Spirit might rediscover in itself the reconciliation of difference this Spirit brings, might know this healing as God's own work, and might become an instrument in God's hands in the world, not to its own glory, but that it might fade into the background of a reconciled humanity, the gift and glory of God. Amen.
