

Pentecost 17
6/10/2019

Mark the Evangelist

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Psalm 143

Luke 17:1-10

The life which is really life

In a sentence:

True life is hidden from us until God reveals how we have gotten life wrong

In one of our reflections on Hosea I suggested that most of us are lousy sinners: when it comes to sinning, we don't do it very well.

Next to this, we've heard today that Paul (or, at least, the writer of this letter) is not susceptible to this charge, being the 'foremost' among sinners.

Yet, when Paul lists his faults, they are not especially impressive. Blasphemy, persecution and violence are certainly bad enough but in quantity and quality it would not be difficult to name a person or two who far exceeded Paul in these or other things; perhaps some such high achievers are sitting here among us today.

Paul holds these to be so heinous because they had to do with his active persecution of the church. More particularly, in the account of his conversion we have in Acts, a voice is heard out of blinding light: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*? (as distinct from 'my church'; Acts 9.4). The voice identifies itself as the crucified and risen Jesus, the true object of Paul's rage.

What makes Paul the foremost among sinners is not, then, 'moral' failings we might read into his behaviour. He does not violate this or that rule when he should have known better; he has stood against the crucified Lord.

In the account we have in 1 Timothy, Paul holds that it was 'in ignorance' that he did all this. The thing which matters for understanding sin and grace in proper relation, however, is that he did not *know* at that point what he did not know. His rage against the church was *righteous* so far as he and his supporters could see. He rejected – for good reason – the notion that the crucified Jesus, with the emphasis on 'crucified', could be the Christ. The least sympathetic critics, with Paul, read the crucifixion as proof that Jesus was a heretic.

And so the 'ignorance' of Paul's actions is one of the key moments in our short passage today. The passion with which that unknowing was defended and forced upon others reveals something quite contrary to the assumption of our information- and knowledge-based culture today: the assumption that we can be confident that we are right about our rightness. It is at his pious best that Paul fails, without knowing it.

What shifted Paul from persecutor of Jesus to his champion was not reflection on the logic of belief, unbelief or heresy, or reason versus unreason; ignorance will *not* out.

What shifted Paul was being stopped in his tracks, confronted with a vision of God not only *different* but deeper and richer than he had known till then. It was only this which revealed his miscalculation of God and his lack of understanding of the breadth of God's love and extent of God's power.

Coming to terms with the new vision was not straightforward. It was a long time between Paul's conversion and his beginning on missionary work. But the effect of that reflection was that he came to see how his ignorance had cast his *saviour* as his *enemy*. When we find ourselves in that situation, it is only that saviour who can save us, despite ourselves. We cannot find our way to him because, to us, he is only our enemy and everything he does would seem to be to hurt us. This is the pathos of those who, because there is no hell, necessarily find themselves in heaven but are miserable nevertheless: it is a torment to be in the presence a God we imagine to be a threat to us.

To be in heaven *and to know it* as heaven is to have received a new vision of ourselves and God and the world, and to have begun to live it.

This is what the writer of the letter calls, in his final remarks to Timothy, entering into real life: '...take hold of the life that really is life' (6.19).

We gather here each week precisely to be reminded of, and – God-willing – to be drawn a little more deeply into, the life which really is life. This will not always begin as a beatific vision of God and the angels, and ourselves in their midst. It will sometimes hurt. In the story of his conversion in Acts, Saul is struck blind. That his eyes no longer worked is less important than that he was reduced from clear-mindedness to being not able to see, to understanding nothing. The blind Saul is a dead Saul, shut as it were, in a tomb and waiting for the stone to be rolled away again, that a new light might flood back in. In this way, only the believer can properly sin, and so properly be forgiven, because only the believer remembers the stone being rolled away.

We each need to be buried in the same kind of way, in order to come to see how we have misjudged, over-reacted, denied what is true or affirmed what is false. And we need to see also how that new sight is both judgement and grace. Each of these two matters although, if the crucified Jesus is Lord, the judgement is something we look *back* on from the perspective of grace.

In our first reflection on this letter I suggested that the basic condition for which we are created is 'timotheic': we are all 'Timothies' created for the honouring of and being honoured by God (the 'Tim-' meaning 'honour' [*time*] and the '-thy' meaning God [*theos*]). This is the substance of heaven.

If we are all created to be 'Timothy' in that sense and yet *fail* to be so, we are, then, also all *Paul* as he describes himself today: either ignorant of the life which really is life and needing to hear of it, or now looking back in wonder at what we once thought to be true.

To grow into this estimation of our unworthiness and yet great worth is also, with Paul, *each* to become 'the foremost among sinners.' A new and more penetrating light now illuminates our world.

When this happens, it becomes possible that we might be saviours ourselves, of a kind: people who reveal and deal with the captivities of others not by accusation but by words and actions of illuminating grace which bring the light of our great worth to God and, by the way, reveal the judgement of sin, already yesterday's news.

Such a life of righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness (1 Timothy 6.11) is the life of Jesus himself, by which we have been saved, and which we are now called to live.

Let us, then, so live that others might also live.
