

Pentecost 22
10/11/2019

Mark the Evangelist

1 Timothy 6:1-5

Psalm 145

Luke 20:27-38

Of fanaticism

In a sentence

The fanatic knows and mis-takes; the believer is known and finds peace in this

One of my all-time favourite little quips by a theologian is from Gerhard Ebeling: “Theology is necessary because [the human being] is *by nature a fanatic*.” This little remark has exercised me somewhat recently.

Ebeling is almost certainly right here. Yet, correct – and cute – as the comment is, in the hands of fanatics themselves it quickly becomes something like ‘we’ need theology because *you* are fanatics. The ‘we’ is intentionally inclusive – for theology *must* ‘include’ – but the ‘you’ is quite exclusive: you are fanatics and this theology will tell you why.

If course, this won’t work because it indicates what we already know: that fanaticism just as much *springs* from theology as it might be *treated* by theology. The word ‘fanatic’ springs from a Latin word for ‘temple’; the fanatic is en-thusiastic, filled with God (from the Greek *en theos* – ‘in God, God within’). Ebeling, then, is correct but uselessly so. The problem is not the absence or presence of thought about God but the quality of that thought. *And the quality of our thoughts about God is always hidden from us*. This is signified by a *crucified* Christ: ‘oops’...

Some of my thinking about Ebeling’s remark has been in relation to the fanatics the Pastor deals with in the letter to Timothy, of whom we have heard a little this morning. Yet, their particular mistakes aren’t so important here as the fact that the Pastor does not offer much good argument over against them. His approach is narrowly credal: here is the true faith, asserted without engagement. Orthodoxy agrees that the Pastor is correct but his failure to engage with his opponents leaves him himself open to the charge of fanaticism, and illustrates the problem with Ebeling’s explanation of the need for (good) theology: all theology borders on the fanatical.

In our gospel reading today we hear something rather more engaging, if we are not distracted by the form of the question put to Jesus. That form is a challenge about marriage and resurrection, put to trip Jesus up. If a person is legally married multiple times before death – which is common enough – to whom is she married in the resurrection?

Jesus’ response is first clever and then rather shocking: marriage doesn’t really matter much in eternal life. The life lived in God’s restored kingdom is oriented toward God and not toward the history which has led up to it.

This is surely troubling. The argument for life after death is won at the expense of the life we might have valued *before* death and look forward to continuing in eternal life. And it cannot only be marriage that is affected here. What Jesus says affects also parent-child relationships and friendships and even enmities. It affects our greatest

achievements, and our worst. This doesn't make such life experiences unimportant but it does relativise them, and starkly.

In fact, Jesus' point is less about marriage or resurrection than it is about how the things of the world are related to the things of God. Marriage is a part of our present experience of time. Yet *our* experience of time and *God's* experience of time are as radically different as if it were the case that the bonds of marriage could be broken. Or to put it differently, the difference between our experience of the world and God's experience of the world is the difference between life and death.

What has this got to do with fanaticism – whether explicitly theological or in its more 'secular' forms?

The fanatic gets hung up on marriage, or resurrection, or life, or death, or the nation, or race, or youth, or health, or money or any other thing we value, *as things in themselves*. The Sadducees separate both marriage and resurrection from the reality of God. Marriage is 'a thing', and resurrection is a thing and God, too, is a thing, each in themselves. Against this, Jesus refuses our division of ourselves into parts with their own intrinsic value. *Everything* is finally relative to – oriented towards – God.

The fanatic requires that our experience becomes God's experience. From here, my faithfulness – as I understand it – becomes God's obligation to honour me. And so I know what God's future looks like, or can't look like. For the Sadducees, the divinely sanctioned series of marriages of their highly tragic serial widow means there cannot be a resurrection.

The fanatic requires that our experience becomes God's experience. It's part of what we do in gathering in this place to suspect that we all might be fanatics of this sort.

What hope do we have if we must believe and act and yet know also that we might find good reason later to repent of our creeds and actions? How do we both know ourselves to be right and know ourselves to be wrong?

While the fanatic requires that our experience becomes God's experience, hope is found in the promise of the reverse: that God's experience might become ours. This promise is the word of peace brought by the risen Jesus.

God's experience is quintessentially the impossible mismatch of the source of all life dying on a worldly cross. Here good and evil coincide, the Word marries flesh. But God's experience is also that the cross is God's own, and not only worldly. The cross, then, becomes a lively place, despite all appearances. It was set up by us as a final word, yet God makes of it the beginning of a conversation.

That conversation runs something like this:

“Here is your final word,
be it your marriage or your divorce or your singleness;
be it your pride or humility;
be it your greed or generosity;
be it your fear or confidence;
be it your grief or happiness;
be it your life or your death.

“And here am I, God, taking those things and making them my own.
And when I make them my own, I fill them with life.

And I give them back to you, that I might be all in all, and that you might know the peace which passes all understanding.”

The fanatic knows that he *understands*, and expects peace to drop out of understanding's equation. My future with God can be calculated.

The true child of God knows only that she is *understood* – comprehended – and loved nonetheless. It is a mystery how this could be so, but peace is peace, even when we do not understand it.

There is much to comprehend, much to argue, much to fight for, much to testify to, much to grieve over... We *wed* ourselves to many things and make them our own.

And yet, the argument and the struggle and the testimony and the grief are finally God's, and God will overcome. This is the mystery, the secret, of our lives.

In the resurrection, whose wife shall the much harried and fanatically married church be? She will be Christ's wife: peace beyond all understanding.
