

Lent 4
22/3/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 50:4-11
Psalm 130
John 11:1-25

Love's new creation

In a sentence

The Servant's faithfulness is a confidence that, in all things, he is held by God, and this frees the servant for love even when he is being made to suffer.

The fear unfolding around the COVID-19 pandemic is, in part, fear of the widespread suffering and death it threatens to bring. This is the fear of the loss of things we love – people we love.

In fact, in this instance, significant loss is already being realised even before any such death touches us personally. Fundamental to being human is our embodied relationality – the physicality of our being-in-relation with others. Without this we are not ourselves.

Yet a virus *weaponises* human social being against us. And so, in the absence of a vaccine or antidote, we are forced to battle this threat by denying it what makes it strong: the centrality of our bodies to our relationships with each other. In order to defend ourselves and those we love we isolate ourselves from each other. And yet we lose something of ourselves and them in this process. Even before anyone dies, then, the virus brings about a kind of death-in-diminishment.

What we fear here is the loss of what we love – the deaths of people who matter to us, the isolation from those who are a part of us.

There is, however, another fear which has manifest itself in response to the threat of the virus. We see the signs of this fear in the empty shelves in our supermarkets. Those empty shelves are not merely about greed or irrational thinking. They are a sign of the fear that, in all this, we might actually be alone.

If the fear of death and social isolation is the fear that we might *lose* what we love, the run on supplies reveals a fear that we might not *be* loved, that there is finally only me-and-mine on whom I can depend in the struggle to survive.

Thomas Hobbes characterised human social existence as 'a war of all against all'. This might seem a *little* dramatic as a characterisation of recent toilet paper shortages, but that is only because of the robustness of our supply chain and the strength of our institutions. Hobbes argued we need such things to protect ourselves from *ourselves*, and we have learned from him. We have been able to set the ship upright again because the ballast in our political economy is so substantial. But this can blind us to what was indicated in the temporary imbalance: I feel safer if *my* pantry is full rather than having to rely on you to give to me from *yours* when the need arises. I'm not sure you love me that much, that God loves me that much or that 'the system' which is our economy and society loves me that much.

Our lives, then, are caught up in the threat that we might *lose* what we love – by the virus or any other means – and in the fear that we might not *be* loved, that we might be *alone* in our suffering.

Our reading from Isaiah this morning describes one whose experience of threat and suffering differs from ours in form but not in substance. He too is faced with the loss of things loved: the loss of freedom, the loss of dignity, the charge of unrighteousness. In this way, he knows the pain of death, and possibly also has an understandable fear of it. In this he is not different from us.

But this pain does not lead to *doubt* that he is loved. Whatever happens to the Servant – and it is bad enough – he declares, ‘I have not been disgraced.’ This is because it is not *what happens* to him which is the measure of who he is but rather *the God who claims him*: ‘It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?’ (v.9). This in no sense justifies or even alleviates what the Servant suffers. But there is something here starkly different from what we have seen around us lately, and not only lately.

The prophet makes this point explicitly:

Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the voice of his servant,
[the servant] who walks in darkness
and has no light,
yet trusts in the name of the LORD
and relies upon his God? (v.10)

The implied answer to the question, ‘Who among you,’ is, ‘no-one’: no-one walks in darkness and – despite this – holds that they are still loved. But Isaiah is not being pessimistic here.

Only love itself – the refusal to compete for survival – overcomes the fear that we are alone. When the prophet doubts, then, that there are any who honour the way of the Servant, any who dwell in darkness without despair, it is not quite to accuse. It is to see something new in the relationship between God and the Servant.

The Servant’s suffering does not lead to despair, does not cause him to doubt that he is loved. And so the Servant does not compete with others in order to survive, There is no ‘war against all’ which is necessary for him to engage in, because *survival* is not the point – his relationship to God is: *love* is the point. Survival – *mere* survival – is always ultimately *lonely* because it finally pits us against each other. Yet the defining mark of the Servant is that he is *not* alone, and it is out of this that he has life.

This is something new, and it brings us back to what we noted in passing in our first reflection on these Servant Songs. There we saw a strange juxtaposition in Isaiah of the way the Servant suffers and the creative power of the sovereign God. What this means becomes clearer today. The Servant is a true creature of God because, despite what happens, he *remains* the Servant of this God. This unbroken relation, in which the Servant is servant of this God and God is God of this servant, is precisely what creation *is*: the binding of God and creature together so that the one cannot be itself without the other.

Creation happens in the faithfulness of the Servant, in his trust that in all things God is his and he is God’s. This is a creation from the chaos and void of competition and the struggle of all against all for mere survival. In its *absence* we are left, as the prophet so graphically puts it: to ‘walk in the flame of our own fire’ (v.11).

But in the creative spark which is God’s faithful Servant, a different kind of fire is kindled. This is the fire of love in the freedom of one who knows that he, she, is loved.

We can tighten the law to protect ourselves from each other, but fear will out, as will the chaos it brings. The law does not create, does not bring life. The law does not set us free from our fears but only suppresses them.

Yet where there is love, we are fully alive even should we suffer or die (cf. John 11.25f).

Perhaps you recognised some of the phrases in the Isaiah reading this morning, more familiar in St Paul's borrowing:

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is [Servant!] at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

Naming the space of that community as one in which 'we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered' (v.36), Paul continues:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, [or disease,] or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...

The answer to this is the same as the answer to Isaiah's question, but now it is clear gospel: 'No-one' can separate us from this.

And so, Paul declares, 'in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For though we may have good grounds to fear the pain that death and separation can bring, it remains the case that

³⁸...neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers,
³⁹nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from
the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,
the resurrection and the life.

When *this* is our confession,
every moment is alive with God,
as love:
the beginning of a new creation.

Let us then, even out of the depths, lift up our hearts.
