

Easter 3
26/4/2020

Mark the Evangelist

1 Peter 1:13-25
Psalm 116
Luke 24:13-35

Shaken

In a sentence

Though the world shakes around us, though even the faith of God's people might be shaken, God's call to life remains constant

Ours is surely – for the moment – a shaken world.

At the same time, it is not quite straightforward to say precisely *how* we are shaken. Much is obvious, and many effects of what we are presently experiencing under the shadow of COVID 19 we will carry a long way into the future. Being shaken will stay with us for a long time.

At the same time, we expect that ‘this too will pass,’ and some degree of normality will return. Some things will be very different among us in the years to come. Yet we might have reason to wonder whether these will be truly revolutionary or merely evolutionary changes.

The present *is* revolutionary in that we have all suddenly been exposed to some of the deprivations which are usually only suffered by a minority, but we expect this only to be momentary. As a society, however, there is not a strong sense among us that there is really all that much which will change in the long term, despite what suffering and hardship is presently being felt in many homes and hearts. A return to some semblance of normality is our expectation, however long and hard that road might be. This will pass. We – most of us – will return to our feet again, even if with a bit of a limp.

1 Peter addresses a community which is also shaken, in three ways, and quite unlike what is happening around us at the moment.

The first is that they have been shaken out of one sense of self, the world and God, into another sense. This is the shaking of ‘conversion’. The new sense is hinted at in the contrast Peter draws between what desires are *now* appropriate to them, in contrast to those desires they ‘formerly had in ignorance’ (1.14). We hear of this shaking also in the language of purification (1.18). There is no sense of ‘going back’, of a return to normal. ‘Normal’ has been left behind for something else. Ears have heard what cannot be unheard, eyes have seen what cannot be unseen, and nothing will be the same again.

In this, ‘normal’ is now longer *habitual* or *regular* – what we are *used to* – but a standard, a measure. And the measure is sufficiently different that Peter can make strong the contrasts he does. Again, in the next chapter:

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (2.10).

The ‘new normal’ has not arisen out of normality itself but out of God's claiming of those to whom Peter writes. The new normal is that God says, ‘You are *mine*’, and we hear God, and it changes everything.

Conversion shakes us in this way. ‘Normal’ is what we are moving *from*, not what we are moving back to.

After such a conversion, the second shaking of Peter’s community is that, though they have changed fundamentally in their perception of the world, the world itself has not changed. And so the world becomes *unexpectedly* a more dangerous place, as we will see when we move further into the letter. Different senses for the measure of the world create great tension when there is nowhere else to go, when we remain bound together with our different perceptions.

We are surely shaken when, finding that God has claimed us as God’s own, this doesn’t seem to make things very much better or easier but even makes things more difficult. The temptation becomes strong, then, to return to the old normal – to ‘the desires that you formerly had in ignorance’ (1.14), as Peter puts it.

And so comes the third shaking which Peter’s community must endure, which is a *re*-conversion. And it is a *third* shaking into something yet new again, and not a mere return to what first turned their world upside-down. For the experience of testing and temptation itself has now become part of what they believe.

The better thing we reach for in coming to faith reveals of itself more in our *experience* of the difference it has from the ‘normal’ we have left behind. This is to say that to come to faith – that first shaking in conversion – is not to have ‘arrived’. The life of faith itself shapes faith. Faith in God is always faith in the world – faith *within* the world – a world constantly in flux and ever ready to sweep us along in its flow.

In this shifting space it is not what we *believe* which is constant but God’s *address* to us. The word of the Lord which – as Peter puts it – ‘endures forever’ (v.24) as the world withers and fall, endures in its *continually being put*. It is continually spoken because our relationship to God is constantly under challenge in this shaking world.

And so, despite the strong affirmation Peter makes of all which his people have received and are from God (e.g., 1.3f, 8, 22), there remains the need for the imperative: *become* what you are, live as though this One really were God: ‘discipline yourselves’ (1.13), ‘obey’ (1.14), ‘be holy’ (1.15), ‘live in reverent fear’ (1.17), ‘love one another’ (1.22).

That is, *be* mine, God says, as I have called you. God’s word is a ‘relational’ word, is always a word which addresses and, in that address, creates again and again in its very being spoken. Only in this do we have any constancy.

What cannot be shaken is that God claims us as God’s own, and calls us to own that claim. This is faith, wherever we are: to see ourselves with God’s own eyes, looking not longingly to yesterday’s normal but hopefully for what God will do tomorrow with what is cracking around us today.

For this God, cracks in the order of things as our foundations are shaken are not to be quickly plastered over but become means of letting in the light.

That light is our faith and hope.

Let us, then, open our eyes.
