

Pentecost 3
21/6/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Romans 6:1b-11
Psalm 86
Matthew 10:24-39

Reasonable sin

In a sentence
To free us from necessary sin, God kills us in order that we might know
the freedom of Jesus

The thing about sin, not immediately obvious to most sinners, is that the sinner will generally argue that it is ‘necessary’ that the wrong thing be done. We rationalise what we do – perhaps especially when we have knowingly done the wrong thing – and in this way we make wrong-doing necessary, unavoidable. If it is unavoidable, we cannot fairly be held to account for our actions. This is the genius of the accomplished sinner.

And so it becomes justifiable to kneel on a man’s neck so heavily and so long that he dies, for he was potentially a dangerous man; and riots and looting are a justifiable response to that calculation, for surely they have put us down for too long; and sending in the troops to ‘dominate’ the streets is surely justifiable because perhaps the looting is not justifiable after all. This is a chain of ‘if-then’ connections: if I *don’t* do this bad thing, worse things will happen. If I *do* do this bad thing, then worse things won’t happen. I am not *free* here, my hand is being *forced*. If it is sin, it is also *necessary*.

This applies in any scenario when we feel we need to justify to ourselves or to someone else a decision we have made: spending more on your next car than you really need to, indulging in online porn or not going to church on Sundays (when that is health-safe!). We have rational justifications by which we seek to persuade the judge, the Twittersphere or God that the agreed rules of engagement made it *necessary* that we did what we did.

We might even add: if God would only make it that our hands were not tied in this way, then we would not have to sin. In the passage we have heard from Romans today, Paul proposes that God indeed frees us from the necessity of doing the wrong thing.

How? God frees us by killing us. God’s liberation is as strange as this.

Today’s passage from Paul has him in mid-flight through a rather complex account of the human condition, around the themes of sin, law and death. At the centre is that God gives us a death linked to the death of Jesus. It is this death which liberates us.

Death is a useful metaphor here because if there is one thing we can say about the dead, it is that they are free of necessity. The dead truly *can* do nothing, and so truly *need* do nothing.

The only thing the dead can do is what they are told – either ‘*stay* dead’ (which is fairly straightforward) – or, in the instance of creation or resurrection, ‘*stop* being dead’. Having no other option, the dead must rise if there is one who can bring this about, for they can put no argument that they need to do something else. The ‘freedom of Jesus’ is

that he, being properly dead, is then in a position to be raised from the dead at God's command. Jesus being raised is now, surprisingly, simply a matter of obedience.

Paul argues: you must die in the same way, so that you might be raised to a newness of life – dead to the necessities of sin, and alive to God. Surprisingly, being dead to *having to justify our actions* corresponds to being alive to the freedom of Jesus.

In the life-and-death of Jesus, we are given a humanity which does not have to justify itself. For there is no longer any reference point outside of the God who commands, who addresses. And so there is no means by which we can test that we have done the right thing, no third party justification for not obeying.

Of course, we *want* such points of reference and will scarcely give them up. We might comfort ourselves with the justification that 'blacks' *deserve* to be treated that way, or that white privilege and affluence *justifies* rioting and looting, or that peace *demand*s sending in the troops. But this doesn't work. In this situation, and in all other cycles of violence and retribution, there is always another 'necessity' which arises from another point of view, out of the now changed circumstances, justifying more violation.

What does all this mean?

For Christians it means that violence does not justify violence, whether it is the crushing of a possibly dangerous man, the trashing of the shops of the privileged or the threat of violence from armed soldiers. Acting inhumanely – sinfully – has no justification.

But it also means that having power and privilege does not mean that these cannot be shared. It means that wealth – which we think must necessarily be guarded – can be given away. We cannot justify the great differences in power and privilege which cause others to calculate justifications for sin.

It is when the alleged necessities which serve as self-justification are allowed to fall away that the unexpected possibilities of freedom suddenly open up, that *grace* begins its work. It is to this freedom in grace that Paul calls us.

But let us also understand that letting go of 'justified' sin *doesn't* mean that very much is likely to change in the wider world. Or we might say that as much will change as changed with the crucifixion of Jesus. *Grace* is not a 'method', is not a means to a calculated end. Means-to-ends are calculations, rationalisations: if this, then that.

Grace certainly brings freedom. Yet, though it might free me, you may not yet be free. This makes you dangerous and can lead to such things as well-rationalised crucifixions: 'it is better that one die than that the whole people be lost' (John 11.50).

Grace brings freedom but does not know what happens next. This is because the freedom is a freedom to respond to the command of God: Sleepers awake, rise from the dead. Obediently responding to this call, we then wait to hear what we are to do next.

Dead to all rationalisations of sin, we are free to do what is right, for God's sake and for the sake of those wait to see God's righteousness working through us.

Let us, rise and respond, presenting ourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life. For sin has no dominion over us, no argument by which to persuade us not to live the rich and free humanity God commands.
