

Pentecost 4
28/6/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Romans 6:12-23

Psalm 13

Matthew 10:40-42

Beyond good and bad

*In a sentence
Ever tempted to justify ourselves before God, God sweeps our efforts aside and
embraces us regardless*

In our reading from Romans today, it seems that Paul is going round and round in circles and drawing contrasts which are too stark to maintain.

Indeed, there is a going-in-circles in his argument here, although it is more a matter of him following a *helical* path – as in a corkscrew. Around and around he goes, but making progress in another dimension – in a direction ‘above’ any of his circling, adding metaphor upon metaphor to develop the contrasts his proclamation of the gospel requires.

But what about those stark contrasts? Central to our passage today are themes of slavery and dominion. Paul holds that we are all enslaved by *something*, and he reduces these to just two alternatives: slaves to sin, or slaves to righteousness. At first hearing this seems too simple, for surely we are capable of both good and bad. Are we not, then, sometimes ‘enslaved’ by the temptation to do the wrong thing and sometimes *freed* to do the right thing? It seems Paul needs more ‘balance’ in his account of how we are and how we behave. ‘Balancing’ Paul is what many of his readers spend a good deal of time trying to do.

But this is to miss the force of ‘slavery’, and then to miss what Paul means by righteousness. ‘Slaves’ are subject only to one master; vacillating between masters is not an option. If Paul is consistent here, *and* we know that we are capable of both good and bad, then both bad and good works on our part fall under the *one* heading – under the one slavery – which would be Paul’s ‘slavery to sin’. This is where most of us part company with him, and also with his gospel, because for us ‘doing the right thing’ is the meaning not of sin but of righteousness.

Yet, to speak of righteousness as simply doing the right thing lands us back where we were last week. There we considered our tendency to justify sin in terms of its *necessity*: if I *had* to do it, then it is not sin, and so in accord with what God *commands*. This is a *negative* approach to righteousness – our defence against a charge of having done wrong.

A *positive* approach to righteousness would be to do what God has commanded *because* God has commanded it, for it is a ‘safe’ thing to do. If asked by the Judge why we did such and such, we can happily point to where it is commanded in the law.

Yet, in either case – whether *defending* ourselves against a charge of unrighteousness, or *claiming* righteousness for having worked according to God’s law – the law we point to to justify ourselves is *external* to the relationship we have to God. That is, the law stands between us as a barrier to be overcome, or as a third party with whom we have to

check before we and God know that we are in positive relation to each other. If we imagine, then, that we are *sometimes* slaves to sin and sometimes slaves to righteousness, we end up keeping a balance sheet, seeking to ensure that we are in the black. *This* kind of righteousness might impress the locals but it places divine commands and our efforts to meet them between us and God as something in their own right, as something by which even God is bound.

Nowhere in such a dynamic is God *the God who justifies sinners*, for we are constantly required to justify *ourselves* with reference to the law and God's hands are tied by this. This means that good news for those who cannot write their own good news is entirely erased.

The stark contrasts Paul draws – between grace and works, Adam and Christ, death and life, sin and righteousness – have their energy in a radical re-imagination of what it means to stand before God. Righteousness is not what we do or can justify to defend ourselves against God. For Paul there is no defence against God, and there is no *need* to defend ourselves. Righteousness is, rather, what God does to bring justification and relationship with God.

The law is not erased, but neither is it God's reference point when considering us. In Paul's terms, being right with God by *doing the right thing* is displaced from our spiritual imagination with '*faith*'. This is not mere belief – believing for example that God 'exists' or that God wants us to do certain things. Faith here is openness to God's gift of life and blessing, as a simple gift.

The good life – the life of *doing* good – is still part of our calling, but it is now no longer our way *into* God but our way 'out of' or *from* God. Good works move *from* grace, and do not now seek to *secure* it. Good works, then, become a *repetition* of grace.

We give richly because we have received richly. We give to liberate and not to bind. We give, in mercy, what is needed but has not been earned.

In all this life flows from grace, with grace, for the purposes of grace. This is God's gift and call.

Let us then, not from compulsion or anxiety but in joy and freedom, receive the gift and answer the call, that we might become what God gives us.
