

**Pentecost 10**  
**9/8/2020**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Ezekiel 6:1-10**  
**Matthew 14:22-33**

**The blessing of insult upon injury**

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*In a sentence*

*God takes what happens to us – the good and the bad – to tell us who we are and who God is.*

Perhaps some of you have seen the recent stage musical *Hamilton*, an account of the life of the American revolutionary Alexander Hamilton.

The principal comic relief in the show is the appearance several times of King George III, commenting on the action. His first appearance is before the war is lost and so he imagines he still has a chance. [His song](#) ends like this:

‘You’ll be back like before  
I will fight the fight and win the war  
For your love, for your praise  
And I’ll love you till my dying days  
When you’re gone, I’ll go mad  
So don’t throw away this thing we had  
Cuz when push comes to shove  
I will kill your friends and family to remind you of my love’

Of course, in an American telling of the American Revolution, the king’s appearances and comments are deeply ironic. The horror, then, that one might show ‘love’ by killing is both very real and yet, perhaps, softened a bit by the fact that the king loses the war and his ‘love’ is unrequited.

By contrast, the figure of God which features in the first half of Ezekiel appears, at least at first blush, not a little unlike *Hamilton*’s King George but without the relieving irony. The language of wrath and fire and sword abounds, and none of it is good news for those Ezekiel reminds, if not quite of God’s love, at least of God’s righteousness. ‘And you will know that I am the LORD’ – the slogan of God’s freedom we noted last week – finds itself too often at the conclusion of George-like threats, such as we have heard today:

<sup>6.7</sup> *The slain shall fall in your midst; then you shall know that I am the LORD.*

The horror of it all is sufficient to make atheists of many and to cause even believers to squirm with discomfort. These instincts are pretty good.

Yet it ought not to surprise us that things are not quite as straightforward as simply editing out what seems to be such violence by God’s hand. Not least, it is too cheap to dismiss out of hand God the wrathful punisher of Israel, for would we not need then to deny God’s involvement as happy benefactor in the blessings we think we receive from God and so eagerly embrace? Most of us find it easy to identify God’s blessing action in things which go our way. We thank God that we dodged this or that bullet – that we arrived a moment too late to be caught up in the accident, implying that God caused some earlier irritating delay in order to save our lives; or we think it God’s blessing that

we recovered from a serious illness though most do not. ‘Thank God’ is one of the more pernicious throw-away lines on the lips of believers, along with ‘God has been good to me’. Even the expected final receding of COVID-19 will be the cause of thanking God, as if it were something God ‘did’ – did in the same way we might hope God did *not* destroy Jerusalem in 586BC, or did not cause the pandemic in the first place.

The problem with too quick a dismissal of the divine violence in the prophets is that the texts about God’s wrath are as clear as those about God’s benedictions – *to which Ezekiel will also come* – so that we can’t have the one without the other. To imagine God active in *giving* to me but not in *taking* only really works if we split the world into two – and split God also – one part beneficent and one maleficent, the two battling it out through the course of history, with us fleeing from the one to the other.

Yet this is one thing Christian (and Jewish) confession will not allow; God has no rivals. This is to say that the God who blesses is the God who curses.

What then is happening in these terrifying texts? Is God managing history in this way, happily for blessing and horrifically for punishing?

It is clear that Ezekiel reads the suffering and exile as the *sign* of God’s wrath. The question Israel asks is, How could this happen? The biblical prophets answer, God is punishing you.

Yet the word ‘sign’ is important here, for it connects us to our thinking last week, when we noted the ‘like’ language in Ezekiel’s description of his vision of God. There he saw things ‘like’ human figures, ‘like’ precious jewels, ‘like’ fire and a throne. God is only *indirectly* seen, sitting somewhere behind our language but *still* ‘needing’ it in order to be presented – *présent-ed* or ‘made present’.

But if the freedom of God means that God cannot be pinned down with precision, the same must also be said of God’s *actions*. The ‘error bars’, if you like, which indicate our uncertainty about God apply also to knowing God’s action. This is to say that a stark cause-and-effect reading of the connections Ezekiel makes between history and the action of God – even his own apparent reading of them – is an *over-reading* of those connections.

It is not that the words are unclear, it is rather that we might mistake the *kind* of words they are. These are *borrowed* words of blood and fire laid over borrowed events of conquest and exile. They are borrowed to speak of the relationship between an uncertain and disoriented people and a God we can’t quite grasp. This is a process by which God *commandeers* history – even ‘hijacks’ it – for use as a sign of God’s own character, or of the consequences of faithfulness or unfaithfulness. God takes historical fortune and make of it a so-called ‘teachable moment’.

To put it more starkly, Ezekiel’s preaching here is a process of adding ‘insult’ to injury. The injury is what befalls Israel as a matter of the flow of historical events. What we’re calling the *insult* is the charge of unfaithfulness by which that disaster is interpreted, and it’s the insult which matters and which endures. That the very people of God *can* fail – indeed *have* failed – is what we remember from these texts. And so we might refine this further and say that Ezekiel *displaces* injury with insult. The insult endures, long after the injury is past, to the extent that the injury is now only remembered because of the insult, because of the interpretation – because of the revelation of God’s character and what God looks for in the community of believers. Ours is not the experience of the destruction of Jerusalem and loss of all that we love; we do hear the lesson, however: that the people of God can get it wrong just as imagine they are getting it right.

‘Adding insult to injury’ is, perhaps, not the most profound description of Ezekiel’s preaching but it has at least the advantage of being memorable! Yet it does matter that the insult is the interpretation of a history which is then *left behind*. For these texts then call us to humility, repentance and thanksgiving in *whatever* historical circumstances we find ourselves. What is excluded, on the one hand is quivering fear before a God who might crush us to remind us of his love and, on the other hand, the arrogance of the faithful that because things are going well for us God must be on our side.

The pressure of Ezekiel’s preaching is not towards the guarantee that all will be well with those who keep the covenant; faithful people suffer and die prematurely all the time. Neither is it toward all being bad for the unrighteous; the unrighteous often do pretty well for themselves.

Rather, Ezekiel presses towards the guarantee that the world is a place which bears God to us, whether it be ill or good which is at play. God is never nowhere to be found. God borrows the world as it is – be it the good of sunshine or the of newborn babe, or the evil of a pandemic or the cross – so that we might be ‘reminded of his love’ in *all* things.

For, despite what we think we see going on around us, God’s love is what we are moving towards in all things.

It is for us, then, in all things, to adjust our sight so that it is this horizon towards which we are looking as we pass through green pastures and through shadowed valleys.

In all the days of our lives – for better and for worse – ours is the house of the Lord in which all things finally become goodness and mercy.

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