

Pentecost 19
11/10/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Ezekiel 47:1-12

Psalm 1

Revelation 21:22-22:5

Water for those who don't know they are thirsty

In a sentence

God's gift is something we have not yet asked for, but the very thing we need

In this last section of Ezekiel, within which his tone shifts from judgement and condemnation to promise, much space is taken up by the prophet's description of a vision of the new Temple and Temple life, as he is led around the Temple by a figure who measures and describes it in his hearing.

Perhaps most important in all this is the shift in what we might call the 'location' of the Temple. This is a shift not in *geographic* location (the Temple is still in Jerusalem) but in how we *relate* to the Temple and it to us. The Temple becomes now less a *destination* than an *origin* or source.

Signifying this shift is the image of a river which flows from the Temple, strangely getting deeper as gets further from the Temple: first ankle-deep, then knee-deep, waist-deep and finally too deep to cross. Flowing across the land, the river from the Temple supports great forests of trees bearing fruit throughout the year and good for medicine. The water has the miraculous capacity to make stagnant and salty waters fresh, making them habitable for all kinds of fish for food – even the Dead Sea. Sheer *abundance* flows from the Temple, a marvellous promise held out by God.

Yet, for whom is this vision given? The vision is part of a bigger story, so that the earlier chapters of Ezekiel are not left behind here. The vision of the new Temple and its river of life is given for *those who accept the judgment of God* as it has been laid down in the prophet's earlier preaching. The devastating experience of exile has been interpreted as the revelation of the peculiar righteousness of God, and the people's failures in relation to God. At its best, the exile re-orientates the people towards God's particular way and expectation, and this vision of the Temple with its life-giving waters rises to meet those who accept the judgement as much as the gift. If we were to ask how real is the promise of the new Temple and the life which flows from it in Ezekiel's vision, the answer would be that it is as real as the judgement Ezekiel has already announced. The restoration and the judgement cannot be separated.

Our reading from Revelation today, however, pushes this a little further. The Seer borrows directly from Ezekiel's Temple River vision but does so not only with the themes of judgement and restoration in mind, but with these coloured by his experience of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Whereas in Ezekiel we might be able to distinguish between the judgement of God and the gift of God, in Revelation, the judgement *becomes* the gift. This is not because God 'gives' to us by punishing us; it is because Jesus himself – envisioned as the sacrificial 'Lamb' – is where the judgement happens, and *this Jesus* is given to us as a gift.

Judgement and restoration take place not in us but in Jesus himself. We are given, so to speak, our history as judged and our present as acquitted – all in him.

So central is Jesus here that, in the new Jerusalem the Seer describes, Ezekiel's Temple is gone, replaced by 'the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb' themselves. The river of the water of life flows now not from the Temple but the throne of God. (Note that the throne is also present in Ezekiel – see chapters 1, 10 and 42)). In the same way, the sun and the moon are gone, the *Lamb* now being the lamp of God's glory. What there is to be seen – and God and ourselves are the most important features here – is to be seen by the light of Jesus the Lamb, broken as we are by the broken world and yet restored as the very centre of all things.

Judgement and grace are now not two things, the one the answer to the other. If our *experience* in time necessarily means that now we *feel* that ours is a time of judgement, and then now we *feel* ours to be a time of restoration, this is not what God sees. God does not see us in two lights, does not have two thoughts about us [G MacDonald] – now judgement, now forgiveness. God's thought for us is that we be 'of God' – 'begotten' – after the way in which Jesus himself is 'of God' – Begotten. What we separate out as *two* things – judgement and restoration – press towards this one *thing*: that we begin and end in God

God does not give 'little gifts' – this or that miracle to brighten up our day after some passing darkness; this is why the end of COVID will not be a gift of God like that in Ezekiel and Revelation: there will be other COVIDs.

The gift of God is Godself, ever pressing in on us, not as a burden but as light to drive away shadow, even those shadows we like to hide in but which are really only where we hide from the glory God would make of us. We do not always choose the right, and the world around us is the result. But God will always choose us – sometimes a painful choice which dislodges us from our own too-precious sense of what matters. Ezekiel's people knew this pain – the pain of being wrong about the promise and glory of God.

If the vision of Ezekiel and the Seer of Revelation are too much for us, it is because we have not yet accepted the judgement: that it is God's light and not ours by which will be seen the truth of what we are, where we are, and where we might yet be going.

The river of the water of life flows only for those who are learning that they are thirsty: now ankle-deep, now up to the knees, the waist and finally so deep that it becomes our life. This water washes away dirt we did not see, answers questions we have not yet asked.

In this way, God's judgement and grace coincide: we receive from God more than we have imagined we need, just because God sees further and with greater penetration than we do.

This is God's graceful justice: to give what we need.

It is only for us to take this gift, to drink, and to live.
