

Advent 2
6/12/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85

Mark 1:1-8

All flesh is grass, glorious grass

In a sentence
Though our lives are fleeting, we are God's home

Many of you will know that George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* begins with the first five verses of our reading from Isaiah today:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God...Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...make straight in the desert a highway for our God...Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low...Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

The libretto breaks away from Isaiah for a few other quotes from the prophets before returning again to verse 9 of today's reading:

...lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'

The oratorio starts where it intends to finish: with the manifestation of the glory of God.

What is interesting is what Handel – or, rather, his friend Charles Jennings, who selected the texts – leaves out. In particular, he leaps over verses 6-8 in his quotes from Isaiah:

⁶ A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All [flesh (HEB)] is grass, its constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Those who have been part of the Old Testament study groups over this year have again and again seen that what a particular scriptural writer includes or excludes from the text speaks about what the writer assumes to be the nature of God, creation and God's people. This is the case also for writers of non-scriptural texts, even – perhaps even especially – when those writings are quoting Scripture and so favouring some passages over others.

The omission of Isaiah's stark declaration that 'surely the people are grass' shines a light on what Handel thinks is essential here. It would not be unreasonable to read the whole of his *Messiah* as a theology of glory: the God of glory comes in response to the poverty of the human being. Perhaps Handel omits those verses about the transience of human existence because he understood this poverty to be the question to which God's power and glory is the answer. 'Comfort, comfort my people' – it matters not that you are grass, for God comes to heal and restore.

There must be some truth to this. A story of salvation only makes sense when there is something from which a person or people needs to be saved. Yet, whatever Handel himself may have intended, we can do better than the mere ‘power’ of God to save, and we can do this by reclaiming those few verses from Isaiah 40 which he omitted.

The term which helps here is ‘flesh’ (v.6, which is sometimes translated ‘people’, which appears in v.7): All flesh is grass, its constancy is like the flower of the field. Noting ‘flesh’ here helps because it tells us something about the glory to be manifest as the story unfolds. Of course, as Handel’s Scripture selections continue, they tell the story of an anticipated saviour who appears in the person of Jesus, is rejected, crucified and raised from the dead. Human frailty is the problem to which the providence of God, the unswerving commitment of Jesus and divine resurrecting power are the answer.

Yet, what we might miss here – and what is crucial to a specifically Christian account of God – is that transient flesh is not just the problem to which God responds; it is also the way in which God responds. God’s glorious work here – Jesus himself – is ‘made’ of grass which withers, of flowers which fade, is mere flesh.

This shifts us from a theology of glory to what we might call a theology of mystery. This mystery is that the glory of God is carried by what will wither and pass away. John’s gospel puts this together for us: the Word became *flesh*, and we have seen his *glory* (John 1.14). This glory is not *in spite* of the flesh; it is the presence of God *in* flesh, the flesh and the Word still being themselves.

It is not now a problem that all flesh is grass; *it is simply just the case*. The mystery – the wonder – hidden here is that God bothers at all with what is transient. The mystery is that what is transient *actually matters* in any way to God. The fleeting blooms and fadings of the world – including ourselves – are not something God overcomes. God *embraces* the transient world. The mystery of our existence is that the withering and fading world merits the interest of God – that we might be right to imagine that we really matter.

A theology of glory which focusses on God’s power to save begins with the fading flower’s own concern to be beautiful again. The question, ‘Who can save me from this body of death?’, desperately seeks an answer. Fading is the problem to which restoration is the solution. We decide – on our own terms – that we matter, and we look to God to ‘condescend’ to make a difference.

But that coming-along-side which is God’s drawing near to us ought to surprise us more. For it is not God ‘visiting’ us but God coming home, the shepherd finding his truth in the sheep.

This matters in our personal and corporate lives. Personally, a theology of mystery – a faith which holds that this is a God of small things – allows the small to be small, allows the plain and the mundane their share in God’s glory. Being – sheer being ‘here’, doing what we do –has its proper glory. Other visions of what is glorious – especially when we think they are divinely inspired – can reduce to a mere shadow the glory of God. The crucifixion of the Lord of glory is the proof of this: a distorted human perception of glory washing out the mysterious presence of God in the humility of Jesus.

Corporately, the same dynamic applies. As we consider our lot here at Mark the Evangelist and the challenges our property has presented to us, we see the glory of the church of days gone by, and it matters to us that we no longer reflect *that* glory. Our future will be, on such a scale, rather humbler. Will it, then, be any less glorious? Some may think so, within the church and without. But the glory to which we are called

is that of obedience and faithfulness; there is no promise about the future other than that God will be there, as a shepherd is present to his flock.

There is indeed glory in the story of God's people, in the story of God's Christ – Handel is right here, and we are right to join in on the choruses with gusto!

Yet is it a genuinely mysterious glory, which merits also hushed tones. It sees divine strength through human weakness. It finds signs of God in oppressed peoples, in refugees, in the hungry and the imprisoned. The glory of God is not a power wielded from above us to lift us up but a power exercised within us to fill us out – us and all the world. As one of the early teachers of the church put it – God becomes flesh that flesh might become divine.

This is God's promise, wherever we find ourselves. All flesh is grass, and that is enough.

If we believe this promise, ours is the freedom to step boldly into whatever future might await us.
