

Epiphany 5
7/2/2021

Mark the Evangelist

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Psalm 147

Mark 1:29-39

Excess: Beyond Rights and Responsibilities

In a sentence

God gives more, and looks for more, than our rights and responsibilities

As governments have sought to respond to the coronavirus threat over the last year, the precarious balance between our rights and our responsibilities has been very much to the fore.

Shifting somewhat that balance from how it has been struck in modern liberal democracies, the virus has seen a noticeable re-weighting of our responsibilities over against our rights. In places where this has not been the case – where governments have vigorously upheld the right of their citizens to pretend that the virus will respect our freedoms as modern women and men – the cost has been enormous.

This balance will likely tilt back the other way soon enough. Whatever the case, it is important that talk about rights and responsibilities is fundamentally *legal* in character. The attempt to balance my rights with yours – my rights with my responsibilities – takes on the character of a social contract in which we appeal to certain explicit or implicit understandings of what is required of us and guaranteed to us. Contracts – including social ones – reflect an economy of *exchange*. My responsibilities serve your rights; your rights imply corresponding responsibilities: this is balance *without excess*. When it is struck, balance without excess is predicable, and boring.

And this brings us to St Paul, the apostle of excess.

Paul says of his preaching: ‘If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me *no* ground for boasting, for an *obligation* is laid on me, and woe to me if I do *not* proclaim the gospel!’ (9.16). This is all responsibility, laid on Paul by God for the benefit of others. This responsibility, however, is balanced by the responsibility of his hearers to provide him a living.

This is all well and good. Even if we think that hearing the gospel is no desirable thing and that paying evangelists is even less desirable, we know the logic of exchange and can follow Paul’s argument to this point. Yet Paul is not really interested in spelling out how the rights and responsibilities of preachers and their communities should be balanced. Rights and responsibilities are natural components of human existence, and not yet the more deeply Christian ethic Paul goes on to describe. Christian existence does involve rights and responsibilities, but you don’t need to be a Christian to assent to them. If this were all Paul has to say to us, then the gospel is simply a *particular* set of rights and responsibilities – a particular set of *laws*, but thoroughly legal in form, nonetheless.

Paul is under obligation to God to preach, and he does. The crucial point, though, is that although he has this responsibility *and* the corresponding right to claim an income from it, he does *not* claim money for his work. He points beyond the merely contractual

requirements of rights and responsibilities to a possibility of truly *good* and surprising news: news which is not legally *necessary* but catches us unawares and, so, news which is *liberating*. For the good news is concerned not with what is *due*, but with *over-*payment, with what is in *excess* of what is due, with the delivery of *more* than is legally required.

In the first instance, this means for Paul the exercise of ministry without claiming the payment it is his right to claim. But he goes further.

God has embraced Paul as he is and sent him with a commission to preach as he is, and so Paul can rightly expect of others that they accept him as he is. Yet, for the sake of the gospel, Paul becomes as *they* are, that there may be as few obstacles as possible preventing them from receiving the gospel: to the Jews he is as a Jew; to the Gentiles, he is as a Gentile; to those under or outside the law, he becomes as one under or outside the law.

Yet, Paul is not merely being helpful or accommodating here. He turns his way of relating to others into the gospel itself. In another place he exhorts his readers: be as Jesus was, who, although he possessed all the rights of God, did not think them things to cling to but set them aside, taking on the form of a servant, humbling himself to the point of giving up any claim on himself – symbolised by the cross (Philippians 2).

This Paul also does, God's work shaping the way Paul himself works. Becoming all things to all people is not a missionary *strategy*, although we quickly turn it into that. The point is not that evangelism works best if we become like those we seek to evangelise. The point is that *evangelism is excessive service*, responsibility which does not claim its right. Evangelism then becomes not the delivery of information but the very expression and embodiment of the gospel itself – *a giving of self in loving service – an excess of what might justly be required*. The message becomes the medium. The word about love *looks and feels* like love.

In his closing remark in our passage this morning, there is one final dynamic Paul reveals about his work: 'I do all this on account of the gospel, *so that I may share in its blessings...*' (v.23). '*I do this*, so that I may share in the blessings of the gospel...' Not only does Paul embody, or realize, the gospel in the way he relates to those who have a 'right' to hear the gospel. Paul also experiences the gospel *himself* through his excessive and unbalanced service to them. Faith arises out of action. Belief arises from love. And not only the faith of those we serve, but *our own faith*.

There are clues here for churches like ours. Our Synod's Major Strategic Review sprang from a concern for sustainability, realised through strategy. Yet sustainability is an ecological concept, ecology being a profoundly 'legal' space of predetermined cause and effect in natural law. Strategy is a military concept, again the realm of cause and effect: the day is won by bigger guns, cleverer plans and sneakier commandos. Strategy unto sustainability is a commitment to balance and not to the excess of the gospel. What the strategy seeks to sustain might be important, but it cannot bring the good news we so desperately need.

We too, as a congregation, have to resolve how to move into the future: what to do with the enormous resources at our disposal? The temptation will be strong to keep strategy and sustainability to the fore in our thinking. Yet the gospel is excessive, and so is the mission to which it calls us. Mindful of rights and responsibilities, our future is also one of casting of ourselves in trust in the one who looks and waits to see what we will choose, and promises to work with even *that*.

While we must be as clever and careful as we can as we make these plans, it would be well to understand that in fact we are as much ‘forcing’ God’s hand as reading it. This would be an appalling thing to say were it not that this God can take our worst excesses – even the on-balance conclusion that we must crucify the Lord of life – and make of them something life-giving.

The empty economy of right and responsibility cannot bring us life, but only a precarious balance and, with it, anxiety: have we got the equation right? The good news about Jesus tells instead of an excess of love which is undeserved and unbalanced and – just so – is pressed down and flows into a cascade of hope.

Paul finds himself caught up in this gospel current. Drawn into it, he uses its force and power as the means of reaching others, and yet that same force again swirls *him* around, shifting, buffeting, cleansing and empowering for more such work. This is our calling, and the promise which carries it to us. Tomorrow is not the next thing we do, the next necessary step; it is where God is taking us, and where we will next meet God.

Let us, then, allow ourselves to be caught up in the excessive grace of God and begin to learn to become a little excessive ourselves.

*Re-worked from a sermon
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