

Lent 5
21/3/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51

John 12:20-33

We wish to see Jesus

In a sentence

In baptism we take on the humanity of Jesus, and God's love of him, as our own

In our reading from John's Gospel this morning, some people approach one of the disciples and ask, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'.

Gathering as we will soon around the baptismal font, what do we wish to see?

We will see a child – a vital energetic boy, who may or may not co-operate with what we are going to do him! We will see in him innocence – for the most part! – possibility, promise, hope. We will see his parents and their love and devotion to him.

Now consider, instead, that we were gathering today for the baptism of a middle-aged woman. Her couple of marriages – and a few other marriage-like 'arrangements' – haven't quite worked out. She has said and done quite a bit she regrets, has hurt many of those who loved her, and her possibility, promise and hope have largely been exhausted.

Such a person would have much in her past to overcome; for little Finn, what might have to be overcome is still in the future. For Finn, what is going to happen today will be without his permission and quite beyond his comprehension. For our imagined woman, a baptism would be thoroughly intentional and with at least some modicum of understanding. She would speak for herself; today, others will speak for Finn.

It would seem that two such people are far enough apart in their history, their present reality and their prospects as to make their baptisms entirely different things. For what has infant possibility got to do with middle-aged actuality? What has open promise got to do with proven disappointment? What has innocence got to do with guilt? What has the non-belief of an unwitting infant got to do with the belief of a consenting mature adult?

We must be able to answer questions like these because the baptism of a lively infant and the baptism of a weary mature woman *are the same*. The water does not know whether we are young or old, and the prayers do not know whether we are innocent or guilty.

We must, of course, each be some of these things. We will be strong or weak, poor or rich, young or old, ill or healthy, wise or stupid.

But baptism is there for all of us, regardless of what we see in the mirror. We might say that, *when we are in baptismal mode*, we are all innocent, regardless of what we have done, or that we are all guilty, regardless of what we have done: we are – each of us – young *and* old; we are – each of us – promise *and* disappointment.

This is to say, then, that there is an important sense in which baptism is *not about us at all* – at least, not about us *as we imagine ourselves to be*. As we request baptism, do our preparation, make our plans, gather into this space, pray the prayers, splash the water and make our commitments, what is glaringly obvious to us is just *us*, we who are gathered here today.

But, finally, to get here and understand where we are, is to find ourselves equalised, levelled. It is these days only the most Christianly ‘religious’ people who are baptised but religion is not the point here. The point here is to say something about humanity – the humanity of the religious and non-religious – in all its height and depth, its richness and its poverty. We say to the one baptised – surely, a most strange thing – ‘You are human’. This is not because he is young, and healthy, and white, and has likely landed in secure social and economic station in life. Someone, of course, has to be these things, just as others are other things. But whatever we are – white or black, straight or gay, old or young, poor or rich – these things do not define us, do not set our outer limits. We *exceed* all that we appear to be. This exceeding – this ‘more’ – is our connectedness to each other.

I am not myself only – you are part of me. If we wanted to tell the human story properly, we would have to tell the story of everyone who ever lived. We cannot do that, of course. This is, in part, because there are too many stories to tell. Yet, more poignantly, it is also because we *don’t really believe* that all those stories have the same merit; some are less human than we. This is what we proclaim when we allow male to dominate female, white to dominate black, Christian to dominate Jew, Israeli to dominate Palestinian, rich to dominate poor. In these dynamics, we declare that our humanity is not *extended* by the other but *diminished*.

We cannot tell the story of everyone, and we also don’t want to.

To this inability and hesitation, baptism is an answer. In baptism we set in place one story ‘over’ every story. This is not the story of the person baptised – not today Finn’s story, just as it was not mine when I was baptised or any of yours when you were baptised. The one story we tell is that of Jesus. Instead of telling his story alongside mine and yours and everyone else’s in a hopeless attempt to be comprehensive, we tell his story and join ours to his, one baptism at a time.

Why the story of Jesus? Because of what is said of him in the Scriptures: he is the one both closest to God – the Son, the image of God – and as far from God as one can be, in death by crucifixion. He is the one-for-others whose very humanity *is* for and by his connections to his friends and his enemies, and he is also the one rejected because he is too dangerous to tolerate or to be friend of. Jesus is the one who *extends* us, and also the one who threatens our sense of our humanity, who does not extend us but would *diminish* us. Jesus is everything and nothing.

We began by asking, What has infant possibility got to do with old-aged actuality? What has open promise before us got to do with proven disappointment behind us? What has innocence got to do with guilt? What has the non-belief of an unwitting infant got to do with the belief of a consenting mature adult?

What has everything to do with nothing? To ask questions like these is to have in our mind that this or that characteristic is more worthy, more valuable, more human. Our faith contradicts this: it is not enough to see only those things we think matter the most.

‘Sir’, those old Greeks asked, ‘we wish to see Jesus’. Why? Because to see him is to see the fullness of human being – the everything and the nothing – in the form of just one of us. And it is not simply to see this breadth but to see it embraced by God. The cross is the depth of what we can do – the nothing – and the height of what God can do – everything.

God’s arms around Jesus, if we are joined to him, are God’s arms around us.

To see Jesus in God’s arms is to see ourselves there.

As we gather to baptise, this is what we should wish to see.
