

Easter 6
9/5/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 10:44-48
Psalm 98
John 15:9-17

Reconciliation as Resurrection

In a sentence

The inclusion of the Gentiles into the promise of God is a resurrection-like change in human history

Imagine that, when it comes to our leaving these buildings, the benefit of them passes to those you would least like to enjoy them. And that they didn't even have to pay for the privilege.

And imagine that you yourself finally came to have every good reason to believe that this was not a failure of the church or even of the power of God but was *precisely God's plan*.

Perhaps such a scenario might help us to feel something of the impact on the young Jewish church of the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius and his household. For this was an extraordinary development in the life of the people of God: the spilling over of the promises of God out of Israel and into the wider world.

Immediately following what we have heard, Peter is taken to task by other Jewish Christians for having gone to the Gentiles in the first place, and the matter finally goes to a council of church leaders in Jerusalem to seek a common mind on the matter. From the perspective of the Jews – and these first Christians still very much identify as Jews – it is *the* fundamental division in humanity which is overcome here, and the appropriateness of this required careful attention and testing. The inclusion of the Gentiles as beneficiaries of God's promise to Israel is mind-blowing, and is not resolved for the early church by this one event. Paul will be dealing with it again, perhaps 20 years later, in Galatia. There is in all this a fundamental violation of expectation.

What is the meaning of this for us, here and now, as Gentile beneficiaries of this shift in perception of the divine plan? Protestant activists that we are, we are tempted to make God's work into our own, tempted to hear in the story of God's inclusion of the Gentiles only the imperative that *we* must be "inclusive" (to use the political buzzword which currently applies here).

Our love and welcome of the stranger is, indeed, an essential part of Christian testimony. Yet to see in the baptism of Cornelius a moral imperative to be more loving reduces the standing Jew-Gentile distinction to one of mere moral exclusivity. That is, it casts the distinction between Jew and Gentile as a moral failure.

But we should be careful here. The Jew-Gentile distinction, from the perspective of the Jews themselves, was not a matter of inclusivity or exclusivity – was not a matter of moral evaluation of the Gentiles. It was not, that is, a question of the presence or absence of love. The 'chosenness' of the chosen was a statement about God's action and not about the character of the chosen people themselves. Of course, in any particular time and place, the moral judgement may have been made but it is not the heart of the matter. The shift which takes place here is not a decision of the Jews themselves to be

more loving but looks like a shift *in God*, so far as Peter and the early Jewish church are concerned. It cannot be accounted for on any terms other than, 'God did this'.

The 'Gentile question' – the *fact* of the inclusion of the Gentiles – features prominently in some of those New Testament letters associated with St Paul. Paul is the great defender of the incorporation of the Gentile *as* Gentile. That is, he argued strenuously that the Gentiles don't have to become Jews in order to be Christians. This is the argument made in Galatians, made against the Jewish expectation that Gentile Christian men be circumcised. Again, this is not the moral point that the unique quality of being Gentile should be respected, as we might hear argued today under the influence of identity politics. Paul was working out of the universality of Christ, not the particularity of the Gentiles. The letter to the Ephesians (possibly not directly from Paul's hand) presses the Gentile question to the utmost degree.

'...surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, ³ and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴ a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵ In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶ that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.' (Ephesians 3.2-6)

The 'mystery of Christ' is just this incorporation of the Gentiles into the divine inheritance. This is to make *central* to the gospel what happens to Cornelius and his family – and to us as Gentile believers.

I suspect that this comes as something of a surprise to some of us – that we ourselves, *as Gentiles* gathered for the sake of the God of the Hebrews, *are the sign of the gospel*.

Surprising as that might be – shocking even, knowing ourselves as we do – there is more surprise to be had, or more profound illumination. We have seen before that one method of interpretation which the biblical writers sometimes employed was to take two things which are both important and *look* to be the same kind of thing and *make* them the same. One example is the interplay between the creation and the Exodus, both seen as the drawing of something out of nothing; another example is Paul's connection of Adam and Christ – one incorporating all humankind for curse, the other for blessing. The logic of this typological thinking is that nothing God does is separated from the other things God does. The meaning of what God does 'here' is illuminated by what God did 'there'.

Taking a lead from this interpretative method, we can compare two purported centres of the gospel. The one is the centrality of the incorporation of the Gentiles we've just been considering. The other is the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus. This equation is more than the New Testament itself ever does, but it is consistent with the meaning of both the resurrection or the Gentile inclusion.

What becomes possible now is entertaining the thought – and more than merely a thought – that these two 'centres' are the same kind of thing. This is to say that the Gentile inclusion is a resurrection-like event. Or to say that the reality of the resurrection – its meaning – is connected to its effect – the incorporation of the Gentiles. When Peter goes back to Jerusalem to defend himself (in the next chapter of Acts), his defence is, 'I didn't do anything. God did it. I merely saw what God did and blessed it'. Peter might have added, 'Jesus *is* risen, after all'.

As a resurrection-like event, the inclusion of the Gentiles ceases to be at all *moral* in its dimensions. Or, perhaps more precisely, the possibility of a morality which can cross a divide like the one between the Jews and the Gentiles requires a resurrection-like event.

Our society is divided on many fronts, and the church is not different. The demands are strong and loud for correction and redress in relation to race and gender and colonial history and environmental injustice, and many other things. This rage – not too strong a word – is, at its best, a cry for morality, for love. Without question, we could all do much better in the ways of love.

But if the ancient division and antipathy between the Gentiles and the Jews has anything to do with our own divisions and antipathies, then it is not that our experience of the need for love should read theirs, but that theirs should read ours.

For we will not reconcile ourselves to those we think to be too distant from us. We cannot unravel the complex intersections of identity and power, and their manifestation in histories of harm, and their ongoing effects. We can't unravel all this because we can't even agree on what divides us – where the knots are. And so reconciliation is reduced to tolerance at best or, at worst, rejected altogether in genocides and holocausts.

But where we cannot reconcile, God can. A Gentile church is the sign of this, the sign that – by the grace of God – something can come from nothing.

So love and reconcile where you can, of course, and rejoice where that makes a difference. Where you cannot reconcile, rejoice that God can.

And when God does, expect it to be like life from death.
