

Pentecost 9
25/7/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 2:11-3:6
Psalm 91

The house of peace

In a sentence

God creates a peace in the midst of an unpeace bigger than we can comprehend

Those who watched the opening ceremony of the Tokyo Olympics yesterday might have noticed the theme of peace in the speech of Thomas Bach, the head of the International Olympic Committee. Yet it seems to me that, however well-intended were his words and other peace-themed elements of the opening ceremony and commentary, talk about peace deserves more.

We considered peace a few weeks back, and it appears again in today's passage from Ephesians, and so we'll press more deeply into what peace is in Paul's account of the gospel. Paul addresses here a peace which has been found between the Jews and the Gentiles through the work of Jesus, who 'came and proclaimed peace to you were far off [the Gentiles] and to those who were near [the Jews]' (Ephesians 2.17).

It's easy to be distracted from what Paul says here by things we think we know about Jews and Gentiles from reading the Scriptures and hearing that relationship preached for many years, perhaps intensified by contemporary Jew-Arab struggles in Palestine. So far as the Scriptures go, most influential for our hearing of the Jew-Gentile distinction is probably, first, our sense that Jesus was a radical inclusivist and, second, the resistance of the first Jewish Christians to Gentile inclusion.

The notion of Jesus the inclusivist owes most to the Gospels. We might take from texts like these that the Jews were exclusivist and that Jesus challenged this. Yet this reading forgets other things Jesus says and does – that John's Jesus declares, 'Salvation comes from the Jews' or that Mark (and Matthew's) Jesus characterises Gentiles as 'dogs' unworthy of the 'the children's bread'.

Jewish Christian resistance to Gentile inclusion began when Gentiles responded to the gospel about Jesus. The early church was composed of Jewish Christians, and the surprising conversion of Gentiles to the gospel caused much confusion and not a little resistance from Jewish believers.

Under the influence of these readings and perceived attitudes, the inclusion of the Gentiles looks like God overcoming human racism and bigotry through Jesus. The problem is cast as a lack of love on the part of 'the Jews', 'finally' overcome by God. Yet this is not what Paul says here. We presume 'exclusivism' because the *outcome* of what God does *looks like* political 'inclusivism'. What God does here looks similar to what we aspire to do with our modern liberal notion of a broad common humanity and its corresponding commitment to a list of universal human rights. Because God looks inclusive in the way we seek to be, we easily conclude that it is exclusivist attitudes God overcomes, just as we seek to overcome them.

Yet Paul doesn't speak of cultural or racial bigotry overcome in the newfound peace between Jews and Gentiles. He speaks instead of a divine intention previously *hidden* – and so *unknowable* – but now revealed. The absence of peace – the location of the Gentiles outside God's house (2.12) – is not the result of a bad attitude on the part of the Jews. It is – or was – *God's* ordering of things. Until it was *revealed*, there was nothing anticipated (or rejected) like the newly proclaimed relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jew-Gentile antagonism began not with the Jews (or the Gentiles, for that matter) but *with God*. We might say, then, that this *unpeace* was a God-sized problem.

To reinforce the point, we should also note that here it is not that the problem was a mistaken 'idea' about God and what God intended, God's intention then being corrupted by religious bigotry. Paul doesn't criticise the concept of divine election, the priority of the Jews or their distinctiveness among the nations. It was, for Paul, *right* that the Jews were separate in the way they had been. This distinction was God's ordering of things. What happens *now* then, with the incorporation of the Gentiles into God's house, is a total surprise or, in Paul's language, a 'mystery'.

The 'mystery' here is the co-existence in God of Jewish priority and Gentile equality. We don't know *how* it is possible – apart from it having to do with the life and death of Jesus – but only that it *is the case*. And so Paul does not *call* us to peace here but *declares* peace – a peace which is already established, and established apart from the efforts of Jew or Gentile.

This has a strange consequence. For Paul the fundamental division in humanity is that between Jew and Gentile. Yet *sin* does not account for this division; the division arises – extraordinarily – from the grace of God towards the Hebrews. The strange thing is, then, that it is *not* sin which is overcome in the incorporation of the Gentiles into one body with the Jews, as God's house.

It is because of this that Paul parts company with such talk of peace as we heard in the opening ceremony, including the unfortunate singing of John Lennon's 'Imagine'. When *we* say 'peace', we accuse each other because, in the secular world, there is no else to say it to, no one else from whom to seek or to expect peace, apart from each other – the implied sources of unpeace, now required to be different. When *Paul* says peace, it is not an imperative but an indicative: Paul says not 'become peace' but 'here peace is'.

And so there is one other strange thing hidden in our passage today, related to what we've just said. The reconciliation Paul describes here is not quite a reconciliation of Jew and Gentile to each other. It is a reconciliation of each group to *God* (2.16). If there is a reconciliation between these communities, it springs from their respective reconciliations to God. This is to say that peace occurs between mutually antagonistic communities when God *comes between them*. As the Jews turn towards the Gentiles they see, as it were, through the God who is looking at them. And as the Gentiles look at the Jews, they too see through the God who is looking at them. There was a wall between them, now there is Jesus: to the Jews a blasphemer, to the Gentiles just a dead Jew. *This is a peace out of nowhere*.

Of course, despite what we've said about the divine source of the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, we know ourselves to be quite capable of bigotry and racism. And so, despite what we've said about God being the final source of peace, we can also 'imagine' ourselves capable of less bigotry and racism, and we can begin to act towards reconciliation. To proclaim peace as a gift already given is not to say we have no work

to do. But it is to say that our work has the fundamental character of *prayer*. To build bridges is to give shape and body to God's promise, the basis of all Christian prayer. Let us, then, pray for peace by *working* for peace, and call others this life-giving work.

And if this work were to be expressed as prayer, what might the words of that prayer be? Perhaps they would run something like this:

Our Father in heaven, may your name be profoundly honoured.

And so, may your kingdom come, and earth become heaven.

Give.

Forgive.

Lead us.

Deliver us.

For the coming of the peaceable kingdom begins and ends with you.
