

Pentecost 17
19/9/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 6:10-20
Psalm 1
Mark 9:30-37

Of principalities and powers

In a sentence

God meets us in the midst of life and in the midst of life God takes shape

It's not news to many of us that life is something of a struggle. The present pandemic context would be proof enough of that, on top of the ins and outs of daily life: working and learning and loving and dying.

Such things are the form of our struggles, but what *makes* them struggles?

In our reading from Ephesians this morning, Paul offers an explanation verging on incomprehensible to us today. We struggle, not against enemies of blood and flesh – not against what we can see and touch – but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the forces of evil in the heavenly places. Even if it is still alive in modern fantasy books and films, this is strange language in our modern world. The 'cosmic powers of this present darkness' and the 'spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places' have little traction in what we consider to be our 'real' world lives. We have put these things to one side – even in the churches – except for when we want to play.

Yet, this is more problematic than it first seems. What embarrassment we might feel about Paul's language of evil cosmic forces is in strange tension with what *doesn't* embarrass us – the belief in *God*. For surely *God* is a spiritual power – albeit a much 'bigger' one, and a good one. We find ourselves, then, in a strange situation. We believe in what we might call a spiritual *goodie* – God – but not in spiritual *baddies* – the Devil and [his] cohort. And so it is commonly held in the churches these days that God is a personal spiritual reality but the Devil is not.

This has the effect that God is left 'hanging there' in the spiritual realm. And so is revealed something of the modern pathos of faith: we have largely dismissed the spiritual realm but still cling to a 'spiritual' God. The God of the Old and New Testaments inhabited a heaven filled with the forces of good and evil; the God of the modern mind is *alone* in heaven, with little to do. This emptying of the heavens has facilitated the recent resurgence of popular atheism: there is now only one spirit left to deal with, and now we outnumber it. Evangelism can feel like the call to leave the world to keep God company.

Maybe all of this sounds quite sceptical about the things of faith, but scepticism is not the point. The point is clarity about what our language means – to ourselves and to others, for our language is not innocent. Our words cast a world, cast God, cast our very selves. And we are able to hide in those words, or between them. Our language can hide from us who we are, who God is, or what the world is. The question is then whether our words capture us as we truly are.

If it is the case that our words about the heavens (and ourselves) have so shifted that God is now alone in heaven and distant from us in the world, then those words won't do any more to speak of the struggle of life. To persist in talking that way is to become increasingly infantile in our speech. We place words next to each other in the way of a pidgin language which lacks an organising grammar: us here, God there. To what struggles we already have is added the struggle to link what we believe about a spiritual realm to what we live from day to day.

Yet one way of characterising what the Bible does is to see it as unravelling the world *our* words have made in favour of the world *God's* word makes. God's word does not separate but binds together.

At the heart of our confession is the presence of God in the person of the very real and worldly Jesus: the Incarnation. What happens in the very worldly struggles of Jesus, culminating in the cross, *is* the cosmic spiritual struggle. This much Paul has already declared in the first part of Ephesians.

The thing about the Incarnation, however, is that we tend to see it as a 'one-off' which comes to an end: Jesus is born, lives, dies, and returns to heaven. To be fair about this confusion, Luke does give us a graphic Ascension – which is pretty unhelpful – and the Creeds use this to amplify the suggestion. And so it seems that the powers are dealt with, and God is again alone in heaven, although now we see a Trinity rather than a monotheos – a kind of divine isolation 'bubble' of 'intimate partners' and perhaps a little less lonely. Most importantly, the Incarnation looks to have ended, and the world and God are again separated as they were before – into historical and spiritual realms.

But, the point of the Incarnation is that if God comes to the world, it is to stay.

And so, the world becomes the means of God's work with us. If, as our modern society has come to understand, evil is not in some spiritual realm but can only be believed to exist in the ins and outs of history, then this is also the place where we meet God. And real-world actions are the form of so-called spiritual struggles.

This is to say that when Paul calls us to arm ourselves with the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness and the shield of faith, these are not 'spiritual' things. These are *disciplines – practices* – which will necessarily be part of the life of every believer who is seriously engaged in the struggle for an authentic human life. The shield of faith, the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation are things we *do*. The sword of the Spirit is so specific a way of acting that it could cut off the hands of a fool who tries to wield it without sufficient training and familiarity.

God's place is not a lonely throne in heaven but is properly in the world. We find a firm footing in life by attention to God's calling, through practice and discipline, through study, prayer, fellowship and service in accordance with patterns which bring live and love, meaning and order into the loveless and disordered worlds our words so quickly create.

One Christian commentator has remarked that one reason our Christian faith often doesn't make sense to us is that we don't have practices which reflect it and make it real. If God is only a head and heart thing – and in this sense a 'spiritual' thing – then the things of God will make little sense in a world less about heart and head and spirit than it is about what we actually *do*, touch and manipulate. Christian life is habit and action which will strengthen us in lives of love and righteousness.

It is a struggle to be a Christian. There is much to unlearn. We are already armed, if often against the wrong thing – even God.

Yet God is faithful. God meets us with grace even when we fail in our discipleship – even if we arm ourselves against God. How much more, then, will God meet and strengthen us if we seek earnestly to be shaped according to his will by preparing ourselves, putting on the armour of God, growing in knowledge of the Scriptures, growing more confident in prayer, more accomplished in service, and more at peace in the world which God is healing.

Stand firm, Paul says to us, echoing the call of God. Act firm. Work firm. Pray firm.

In this way is Christ's Body risen among us, here and now, we its members, for our life and for the life of the world.
