

Pentecost 11
4/8/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Colossians 3:1-4:1

Psalm 25

Luke 12:13-21

(Off RCL)

Our passage today is levered from all the theological description and argument which has been heard up to this point in the letter, and Paul turns now to what we might want to label the “ethical” part of the letter: put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (3.5); get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language (3.8); clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (3.12-14)

It’s all good stuff. With it Paul puts a brake on any over-reaching in the name of the freedoms Christians enjoy, such as I described last week. In fact, it is all such good stuff that pretty much everyone – believers or not – would agree with Paul here. Of course every now and again, in our own “special cases”, we might imagine that a little fornication or malice is required, but *someone else’s* fornication or malice usually remains a moral problem. Most people have a more or less common sense of what is right and wrong, and so I won’t labour today what Paul says just here: the need to reinforce this kind of moral teaching is the reason we have the tabloid press and shock jock radio.

There is, however, something much more interesting at the end of the chapter, with which we will wrestle today:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything... Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly...(3.18-4.1 NRSV).

Similar sets of injunctions appear in several other places in the New Testament (Ephesians 5.21-6.9, Titus 2.1-10 and 1 Peter 3.1-9). But while broad agreement can be found on Paul’s moral injunctions at the beginning of the chapter, here at the end is something rather more troubling to our modern sensibilities. For whereas we imagine that we do have a choice about sexual impurity or about being malicious or being compassionate, we cannot help being a woman, a child or a slave, if that is what we happen to be. And because *our* expectations about being woman, slave or child are different from that in Paul’s time, we find his teachings here troubling.

It is worth noting here that you could go to a faithfully lectionary-observant church (like this one!) your whole life and never hear one of these passages read in worship. This is because they are all omitted from the three-year Lectionary selections. It would seem that they are so troubling that the editors of the Lectionary, assuming us all to be biblical literalists, have sought to “help” us (or, perhaps, help God?), by omitting these passages, lest we be moved to conclude that in fact women and slaves must “subject” themselves to husband and master or mistress as Paul describes. (It is noteworthy here that we are likely to be less concerned about obedient children – perhaps an indication of the voicelessness of children in our contemporary politics?).

These fears, of course, are well founded. The kinds of social ordering from which we imagine we have freed ourselves today were, and often continue to be, justified by reference to scriptural passages like this one. And most of us consider that to be a bad thing.

However, taking a scriptural book as a whole, even if treating it as briefly as we are in our reading of Colossians, means that we cannot so easily sidestep this scriptural unpleasantness.

The obvious thing to do would be to side with the Lectionary's editors and politely elide the section – pretend that it is not there. But let us consider a question which must be important if we are to be faithful to the testimony of the Scriptures: how is it that Paul – who is not given to such glaring self-contradiction – gets the general morality at the start of the chapter so right but this specific morality at the chapter's end so wrong? For is he not *weak* here? Whatever might be said about his apparent attempt to balance the wife's submission with the husband's love, or the slave's obedience with the kindness of the master or mistress, we cannot escape the conclusion that, in the view of our own liberal politics, he does not go far enough.

Critical for our understanding here is the much quoted, and perhaps much misunderstood, verse at the centre of the chapter: in our renewal in knowledge according to the image of the one who created our new being(!), “there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised... slave and free; but Christ is all and in all” (Colossians 3.11). In Galatians Paul says something very similar, but adds also “there is no longer male or female” (Galatians 3.28).

What Paul is *not* saying here is that in Christ we somehow stop being Greek or Jew, male or female, slave or free. What he is saying is that these identifying characteristics, previously grounds for enmity, are *reconciled*: to be Jew is now not to be *against* the Gentiles but *for* them, to be free is not to be against the slave, to be male is not to be pitted against female, and vice-versa for all.

This is, perhaps, clear enough. But let us look more closely at the couplets Paul lumps together under the one reconciliation. To be Greek or Jew is something over which we have no say – we become one or the other long before we are aware that it is happened, and it is a natural part of our formation as human beings through socialisation. This is not something we would expect people to have to change. So also, to be male and female (noting the cases where this is physiologically or psychologically ambiguous). Being male or female is not something which is troubling in itself and we would not expect people somehow to “stop” being the one or the other. Nature has ordered things thus: we are naturally enculturated and gendered.

But the couplet of slave and free, which Paul adds to the list, is different. We understand this not to be a natural structure but a changeable, cultural thing. In the same way, while maleness and femaleness are themselves natural, the way a culture construes gender relationships is also something we expect to be able to change. And in both cases we have sought to change them as a matter of “justice”. Yet, in his account of reconciliation, just as we remain Jew or Greek, male or female so, Paul says, do we remain slave and free, husband and wife.

The point here is not to suggest that we uncritically take Paul's ordering of these categories on but that we simply note that whereas we distinguish sharply between our natural state and our historical and cultural conditions, Paul does not. Fixed ethnic communities – Jew, Greek – are reconciled, while we remain Jew or Greek. Fixed genders – female, male – are reconciled, while we remain men and women. But *changeable* economic identities – owner, slave – are also reconciled *while we remain owner and slave*, as are such changeable social constructions as wife-and-husband.

For *us*, however, if a relationship or ordering is changeable, the “justice” question must be asked: is this the best possible ordering? Because Paul does not distinguish between the “oppositions” of Jew-Greek and slave-free, he seems to us to be weak on marital relationships and slavery.

The question is, then: who is thinking *correctly* here? If we seek simply to compare Paul's moral teachings with our own preferences as modern western liberals, he will lose every time. Every age imagines that its moral vision is clearer than those which came before and, so, this text is not read in the lectionary cycle. For *we* believe that we must *do* something to change what we think can and must be changed.

And, of course, *we must* act. We have omitted the Old Testament readings in worship over the last few weeks, but God's cry through the prophets for justice is not thereby forgotten. Yet it also remains the case that we cannot ourselves usher in the kingdom. If we reject Paul here because of his apparent failure even to try, then we condemn ourselves to a calling we cannot possibly answer. If we cannot be kind to Paul here, we cannot be kind to ourselves. For we *will* fail to heal what is wounded, to mend what is broken. The circumstances of the fraud and its concluding tragedy should not be forgotten here. How could such a laudable idea as “communal justice” go so badly wrong? We now have a few ideas. But more pointedly, how can there be forgiveness and reconciliation when death has intervened with such finality and other relationships have been so badly damaged? What could be said here other than “God sees, God *will* reconcile, one day?”, which is considerably weaker than what Paul offers on wives and slaves.

There is nothing wrong with saying this, unless it is *all* that is said. In situations of such brokenness we are forced to emulate Paul if we desire to utter a gospel-word. When something is seriously broken and cannot be fixed – at least fixed *now* – we must still say and do something which articulates and embodies here and now even a poor image of the healing and reconciliation proclaimed in Christ: submit, obey, love, respect, carry on as best you can under the circumstances. If it cannot be that the gospel can be heard and lived in unjust, unrighteous circumstances, then there is no good news for us who fail to bring justice and righteousness to reality, and no good news for those who are unrighteous or subject to injustice.

But if we can imagine that something can be said or done which in some *small and incomplete* way speaks or embodies the truth, then we begin to do as Paul does here and, at the same time, open ourselves to the same kinds of charges we might bring against him because we see it differently. We do not always have to settle for where Paul settles. But we will have to do *and suffer* the kind of things Paul does, for now we only see through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13.12).

There is a danger in all this that we are simply self-justifying. This cannot be avoided. It is part of the moral uncertainty which is natural to Christian confession: we cannot *know* what is the next thing which is required of us. And so, because we must nevertheless act, and act *imperfectly*, we must – as Luther put it – “sin boldly”. This is not permission to ignore all the injunctions Paul gave at the start of the chapter, but a call to humility. Not knowing precisely what to do, not being able to achieve the reign of God in our lives, we act, “believing more boldly” (Luther, again) that not our moral agency but God’s capacity to raise the dead (even us!) is our final measure.

Let us, indeed, work to root out injustice wherever we see it – in ourselves, in human relationships, in economic structures, in all the various “-isms” which plague us and diminish our common humanity. And let us, at the same time, give thanks that we will not stand before God and have to give account for where we have failed.

For, already, we have been judged and have died. And now, by the grace of God, our lives are hidden with Christ in God. Because this cannot be taken away from us, we are free to become fearless co-workers with God in his setting-right of the world.

For the gift of this unmerited adoption as God’s children, and the freedom it brings to be and to do with out fear, all thanks be to God, now and always. Amen.
