

Pentecost 13
18/8/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80
Luke 12:49-56

What's the time?

What time is it...?

When we hear that question, we are almost programmed to respond by glancing at our wrist or digging out our phone to reply in terms of hours and minutes. But there are ways of telling the time without a watch, or a sundial, or a calendar. Or, more to the point, there are different types of time. For the purposes of getting into our reading this morning we'll consider just two types, distinguished rather blandly as "ordinary" and "extraordinary" time.

"Ordinary" time is the time in which we live more or less in automatic mode. We fall out of bed, step into the shower, dress, grab some breakfast, head off to work, or finish homework, or make the kids' lunches and drive them to school, or whatever. This is time which unfolds more or less naturally, and we agree in advance to be bound by it. It doesn't require a lot of real decisions. As important as the things you do in that time might actually be, you know pretty much how they go, and you just do them.

What I've called "extraordinary" time is of a very different quality. It is not simply the best of "ordinary" time – a great day out, a windfall, a truly relaxing holiday, even the birth of a baby. These are extraordinary in their own way but they are still the kinds of things which, on balance, we expect to happen along life's journey – the "ups" which balance out the "downs".

The extraordinary time which is properly contrasted with the normal highs and lows of a typical life is the time of *crisis*. This crisis is not simply a matter of some particular difficulty, but is more specifically a time of judgement and decision. What is ordinary and normal is ruptured by the presence of some other reality which casts our lives in a whole new light. Here the question "What time is it?" asks not about where we are on a time-line, but about the way in which we are travelling.

These are the kinds of dynamics sitting under our gospel reading this morning. It is not a comfortable text. We hear Jesus being very un-"meek and mild". "Not peace, but division", the kindling of a fire: father against son, mother against daughter. And then the accusation: "you do not know how to interpret the present time".

How are we to make sense of this?

It will help to note one thing which Jesus does not mean here but which might come to our minds as a possible explanation. We live in a time in which, perhaps surprisingly, religion is very much on the upsurge. This is particularly the case in relationship to international politics, and we need only recall the terrible events in Egypt over the last few days where religious convictions have been taken up and defended with political and military force. Though Jesus is not at the centre of that division, the modern ear may well hear in his words a kind of justification of such religious strife: Here am I, Jesus, in the midst of you, a new religious option which

will split the synagogues, divide the temples and splinter nations – brother against brother, sister against sister.

There can be no question that this has been part of the history of the church. Jesus has been posited as simply another religious option: believe in him, or die. This is nothing if not “divisive”. Yet, the theological problem with this way of thinking is not merely the violence to which it leads but that it is still in the realm of what I have called “ordinary time”. Here, the problem which Jesus seems to present is a moral or religious one *within* time. Time itself is not changed. While Jesus is a new option, he is here *just* an option nevertheless. This much is shown by the fact that the crowds have gathered to see Jesus. Having heard all the rest, now they turn to hear what Jesus has to say.

The concern of our reading this morning, however, runs more deeply than this: Jesus challenges not simply how we are to live *within* our time, but our very sense of what that time actually is: you do not know how to interpret the times. This is rather a mystifying charge, unless we allow that the sign he expects them to use to interpret the time is *him himself*: “You can look around you and take meaning from those signs, yet cannot see the significance of me who stands right in front of you.” Jesus comes to us not as one more option. When he comes he brings about a *crisis*.

A “crisis” (Greek: *krisis*) in the New Testament is a moment of judgement – a time for making a decision for choosing between broad-ranging possibilities and options. In ordinary time, we are the judges. Let us go and see Jesus; let us ponder and reflect, let us take up his cause, or not. In our modern context, in which we imagine that not being “religious” is a real possibility, ordinary time is the time in which we decide to be “religious” or not, to decide for Jesus, or Mohammed, or “none”. On this reading, Jesus can only be a fanatic – perhaps an attractive one, if we are so inclined; perhaps not if our tastes are in other directions.

In *extraordinary* time, however, not we but God is the judge; the times are, in a sense, broken open. Here something is signalled about the nature of the time in which we live which is beyond our capacity to change. Once more, we are in the realm of what we saw a few weeks ago in Paul’s notion of mystery: a “given” around which we simply have to work – a key to comprehending what otherwise cannot be comprehended.

This divine judgement and the mystery it entails is given in the person of Jesus, yet not simply in Jesus the dusty itinerant preacher. We need to shift out of a simplistic historical mode of hearing these texts into one which begins from the point that the Jesus who speaks through the gospels is *already* the one who has been crucified and is risen. This cannot have been possible for his original hearers to understand, because they do not know what is coming for Jesus. But we do. The gospel writers do not give us the history of Jesus by which we might judge him. They know how the story “ends” and they give him and his story to us as the judgement of *our* history – as the interpretation of our times. To be able to read the signs of the times in Jesus, then, is to let the cross and the resurrection be what interprets the world for us, a filter for seeing anew death and life, division and peace.

In our time – at least as much as any other time – we long for peace. Daily news reports build within us the sense that there is no real and enduring peace. Crisis abounds, not in the sense of judgement but in the sense of the absence of peace: murderers to catch, fanatics to be restrained, economies to be managed, politicians to

be endured, bills to be paid, relationships to be restored or ended. And in the midst of this is the troubling suggestion of our gospel reading that Jesus *contributes* to these kinds of crises: father against son, mother against daughter, not peace but division.

But in fact what is here judged is the false and limited peacefulness for which we settle: relationships in which we've decided to cover over where there is no peace. This is the peace of polite civility – the polished veneer which protects us from being discovered in our true selves. It is the peace which comes from distance, such that a benefit we have from an injustice on the other side of the world troubles our conscience less. It is the peace which forgets our history and is blind to the present and is created by “stopping the boats”.

Such false peace is the peace of “family” in the broadest sense of tribe, clan and nation – a peace which is only effected by privileging the majority or the powerful at the expense of others. Within these families, Jesus brings judgement. This judgement does not *create* division, as our own judgements always do. Rather, the judgement which comes in the death and resurrection of Jesus *exposes* the false peacefulness for what it is. We must not forget that Jesus is crucified – divided off – for the purposes of “keeping the peace” (cf. John 11.50); the resurrection of such a victim as this reveals how skewed our sense of “peace” can be. And yet, this same one returns to God's confused and divided people not in vengeance but with the words, “Peace be with you”.

The lack of peace we know in our world, and the false peacefulness we are tempted to promote as the presence of God's kingdom, will continue to be realities with which we have to contend; not much has changed since Jesus first spoke of these things.

But through the history of the cross and the resurrection is made possible a different kind of peace: a peace which “passes understanding” (Philippians 4.7) in the midst of the absence of peace, the spreading of an abundant table in the presence of our enemies (Psalm 23). This is the peace which comes from being known in the depths of our divisive humanity, and still being loved. It is the peace which comes from being truly known in our falsehood, and finding ourselves made true.

What is the time? It is the time for telling such truth, that God's own peacefulness might find wider hearing in the world. It is the time of the children of God, whose identity is not a matter of what they do or what is done to them, not a matter of who they name as mother, father, brother, sister, friend, enemy. It is the time of those who know themselves first by a different basic relationship: judged, *and yet* loved, and so able to work for the re-working of human relationships according to the pattern of God's love for us in Jesus.

That the time of our lives might be like this, all thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.
