

Pentecost 16
8/9/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 18:1-11
Psalm 139
Luke 14:25-33

The uselessness of God

As we come to such ancient texts as the preaching of Jeremiah, one of the questions which must eventually assert itself is, in what sense is this the Word of God *for us*? In these passages we overhear a conversation between God, Jeremiah and Judah which took place 2600 years ago. Yet, for better or for worse, I am not Jeremiah and you are not Judah. In the absence of any specific indicators that we can align ourselves with or against God in the ways in which Jeremiah and Judah were, we might find in the readings at least a warning about actions and consequences. Even this much is not to be sniffed at. Yet, at the same time, it also is not quite the “Word of the Lord” to a specific time and place. Jeremiah was not grey or lukewarm, giving general instructions for when they might be useful. Black or white, hot or cold, his was a naming of a clear and present danger for the people of Judah, with specific options for specific outcomes.

Not being sixth century Judeans and lacking clear application to our own political situation, we have come at Jeremiah somewhat “sideways”, asking about what is happening for faith in these declarations, in their being written down, and in our hearing of them today.

Today’s reading has at its heart the theme of the sovereign freedom of God, indicated in the metaphor of the potter and the clay: the clay is to be as the potter determines and not the other way around. This is interpreted in quite specific terms for Judah: “I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you” (v.11). The notion of the sovereignty of God, however, is rather abstract and not very interesting, particularly given the absence these days of any real sovereigns. To get into what the Scriptures mean by the sovereignty of God, and how it might be that such a strong statement might be heard on Jeremiah’s lips, we will explore God’s sovereignty with reference to two aspects of the scriptural witness to God. The first of these is that it is predominately *not* the case for the Scriptures that there is one God, but rather that there are many gods, with the scriptural question being: which among these many “gods” matters? The second aspect of the scriptural witness about God is that the one God which Scriptures declare does matter is quite useless; in fact, only a useless God could really finally matter at all.

We begin with the many gods.

Christian faith is strongly associated with monotheism – the idea that there is only one God. Christianity is one of several so-called monotheistic faiths, with Judaism and Islam and others besides. (For our purposes today we’ll remain mostly within the space of the Old Testament and leave the importance of the Trinitarian dimensions of Christian confession for another time).

For faith in the public sphere today the pressing question seems to be whether or not there “is” a God. This question is itself fraught with problems, but the important point for now is simply how far this is from the pressing question of the Scriptures, where the question is not the existence of God but *which* god matters. It is assumed that there are many gods, and the debate is about which of these is most deserving of *fear*. For it is understood that a god is something you fear and, conversely, if you fear something, it takes on divine characteristics in your life. There are many such feared and fearful things in our worlds. This being the case, the question becomes all the more pressing: what is to be feared *the most*?

For a large part of the Scriptural testimony, the people of Israel are not monotheists but henotheists. The prefixes “mono-” and “heno-” are both from Greek, and both have the basic meaning “one,” but they are used to indicate different theological realities. Monotheism describes the understanding that there is only one god, and that all other purported gods are in fact not gods. Henotheism describes the understanding that there are many gods but that we only ascribe to one of them – a kind of “local” monotheism. Typically, the one god we believe in will be the god of our particular nation, tribe or clan. Henotheists, then, understand there to be many gods, but worship only one (as distinct from polytheists, who understand there to be many gods and worship many gods).

It sounds all very technical but if we are to make sense of the scriptural testimony and its address to us today we have to understand that their theological world was different from ours. Unless we recognise this difference what is happening in the preaching of Jeremiah will make little sense. While his preaching sounds monotheistic in that it rejects idol worship as a matter of worshipping stones and blocks of wood (e.g. 10.6-16), it is operating in a space in which a choice between gods has been made as if there *were* many gods. And so the question is not whether there is a god, but which god is sovereign – which god among the gods *matters*.

The important point is that to speak of the sovereignty of God is not in the first instance to say that God is like a king over us. It is to say that *this* God is king over the *gods*. There are many lords and many gods, principalities and powers which are operating in our worlds (cf. 1 Corinthians 8.4-6). Which is the one which is free to do with us as the potter does with the clay? This is a serious existential question: what do you fear? What do you serve? What shapes you? The preaching of Jeremiah casts our answers to these questions in terms of divinities.

Or, to put the matter differently and to move to the second aspect of the scriptural witness to God’s sovereignty, what use do you imagine God to be to you? For the uselessness of God is a specific consequence of God’s sovereignty, and a consequence of Jeremiah’s preaching with direct relevance to our thinking about God today. This way of speaking of God, of course, is deliberately provocative. For what use is a God who is useless? What could the church possibly have to proclaim if this were the case?

The quickest way into understanding the importance of confessing the uselessness of God is to consider the opposite: in what ways do we imagine or desire that God be *useful*? What purpose does God serve for us? What is the “reason for God”, to cite the unfortunate title of a recent and very popular book?

God would seem to be useful as an “explanation”. “It all must have come from *somewhere*”, “somewhere” being the mind or will of God evoked as a “closure” for the problem. “It must have happened for some reason,” this reason residing hidden and inaccessible in God’s mind. Things are ordered as they are, because this is how God intended them to be. You suffer because God is punishing you, or because God is teaching you something. The world is ordered as it is because God has ordered it so, by which God becomes useful for justifying the social and political status quo.

For the most part, this kind of God fills gaps in our knowledge and understanding of the world until such time as some other kind of knowledge renders God no longer necessary for our understanding of what previously would have mystified us. With each advance in understanding the world in its own terms the useful God becomes less useful, each advance being another cut to drain away the lifeblood of God. Contemporary atheism simply concludes that God is no longer useful, has bled enough to be properly declared dead.

In a similar way, God would seem to be useful as comfort. It cannot be denied, of course, that there is much consolation in faith. But what for those who do not need consolation? What is God to them? Does the proclamation of a Jeremiah have to wait for the people to feel a need for consolation? And what consolation is there in our reading today: “I am a potter shaping evil against you”? Jeremiah will also console but, most importantly, not at the point at which the people imagine they most need a consoling, comforting word.

The useful God is useful to us in the same kind of way as a good saucepan is a tool for a specific task. When the tool proves inadequate, or the task no longer necessary, the tool ceases to be useful. As it is with kitchen utensils, so is it also with gods.

Judah finds itself in need of a god to defend its cause – a *useful* god, if ever there was one. But it gets, instead, the preaching of Jeremiah: “I am a potter shaping evil against you”. This is not necessarily “the Word” for us today, but it reveals the nature of the God who addresses us through these texts. This God’s sovereignty and uselessness we might more positively sum up in terms of freedom: this God is not bound by any other power, nor by us and our perceived needs. God cannot be wielded to effect our visions for ourselves. The only thing by which God is bound – the only thing which has God in hand, so to speak – is God himself. And it is here that what might be a terrifying, capricious freedom of God becomes a liberating and life-giving thing, for God binds himself to faithfulness to his promises. What comes upon Judah is the result of a failure on their part and is simply the consequence of that failure. God “punishes” here because that was the deal (vv.7-10).

But even then, even when disaster comes through our grasping after useful gods who will do our bidding, there remains the faithfulness of God. The foundational promise must be fulfilled: I will be your God, and you will be my people. This must be fulfilled, even if the dead must be raised for the purpose. The power of God which finally matters is not the power which can bring death and destruction but the power which can re-create, which can bring to being that which no longer exists, which can raise the dead to life. This power is of no “use” to us because the dead – if they really are dead – have no use of anything. There will be life – and life in all its fullness – but not on our terms, because the dead cannot negotiate.

God is sovereign, even over the last and greatest of the gods – death in all its forms. And even if God is of no use to us, God has a use for us – that we might yet live, finally neither using nor being used, the very proof of God's own love and faithfulness.

For God's sovereign freedom as grounds for the openness of all things to life, all thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.
