

Pentecost 18
22/9/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 8:18, 9:1
Psalm 79
Luke 16:1-16

Baptism in the tears of God

If you have had a go at reading through Jeremiah, you will have noticed that it is very difficult to pick up the narrative thread. For the book is, chronologically, something of a dog's breakfast. It has a beginning – the call of Jeremiah as a prophet – and it ends 40 years later with the final exile of the upper echelons of Judean society. Yet between the first and the last chapter it jumps all over the place. One commentator suggests that, if you wanted to read a chronological ordered narrative, you would have to read chapter and verse in an order something like this: 1.1—7.15; ch. 26; 7.16—20.18; ch. 25; chs. 46–51; 36.1–8; ch. 45; 36.9–32; ch. 35; chs. 21–24; chs. 27–31; 34.1–7; 37.1–10; 34.8–22; 37.11—38.13; 39.15–18; chs. 32–33; 38.14—39.14; 52.1–30; chs. 40–44; 52.31–34 (The NIV Study Bible, Zondervan).

Now, it cannot be the case that the book is disordered in this way because the editors were somehow “primitive” and simply could not get it together properly. Clearly, from numerous other Old Testament examples, they understand how to write a linear history.

Rather, it seems to be the case that getting the historical detail in the right order was not their main concern. That is, the book of Jeremiah is not a history as such, not an account of what happened, when, why, and by and to whom, even though there is plenty of this kind of information. Rather, we jump from accusation to lamentation to threat to a word of hope to a stretch of narrative, and then all that again, although this time in a different order. The effect is that Jeremiah becomes something of a “feel” book, rather than an “information” book.

It is partly on account of the book's “feel” that we've come at it somewhat “side-on” in our reflections over the last month. We've looked at how the book as a whole can be seen as representing the basis for the particular Old Testament testimony to the God of Israel; we've reflected on how the sin of the people at that time could be seen to be the definition of sinfulness for Old Testament faith. We've seen in Jeremiah's preaching a radical revelation of the defining sovereign freedom of God, and how his preaching and the experiences to which it relates could be the basis for the biblical confession that this is a God who creates out of nothing.

Each week, then, we have drawn out something which might be said to be “foundational”. The point of this has not been so much to declare that everything started with Jeremiah but rather that, whatever the “everything” of biblical faith is, Jeremiah's preaching coheres with it. And this is how it must be, if it is possible to hear today anything which might be considered “the Word of God”: we must be able today, again, to encounter these foundational realities and experiences in our own time, re-learning the meaning of faith, sin, freedom, creation, and more. This morning that “more” will include grief and death, and the possibility of life out of them.

At the centre of today's reading is the crushing grief Jeremiah feels at what is happening to "my poor people". Last week the prophet four times declared "I looked..." and gave an account of desolation and chaos from his vision of the land. The counterpart to the desolation envisioned in last week's reading is the pain expressed in this week's passage. We have heard today, again four times, "O my poor people": the cry of my poor people, the hurt of my poor people, the health of my poor people, the slain of my poor people. Whereas we have heard much accusation and threat from Jeremiah, now we hear his sadness, sickness and suffering over the realisation of what he has had to preach. There is no consolation here, no premature word of hope or comfort. Whatever hope or comfort might yet be heard, the pain is pain.

And yet in the poetry we get more than simply Jeremiah's own grief. We see some way into the nature of grief itself, its own peculiar "logic". There is nothing surprising about what has happened (or, perhaps, is about to happen?). Plenty has already been said about why this disaster has been visited upon Israel. In the reading this morning the Why is reduced to "their foreign idols", representing for now the whole range of charges brought in more detail elsewhere. The judgement is final. And yet Jeremiah himself still wonders: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" It is as if he knows what has happened and why, and yet doesn't know, and both at the same time. Here the self-contradiction of grief, which admits at the very least the fact of our mortality – that no one gets out alive, that God gets us all in the end – and yet asks the Why question.

Jeremiah's grief can be contrasted with that of those over whom he grieves. He knows the Why of their suffering, but they do not: "Is not the Lord in Zion?" they ask; "The summer is ended, and we are not saved", as if this had been the expectation. Jeremiah's suffering is in his being joined to them; they cannot suffer without him feeling it. Perhaps surprisingly, he does not pray for them; but he has already been warned not to pray for this people (7.16; 11.14; 14.11). In place of a prayer is his grief, for he cannot but weep. As a prayer, his grief is inarticulate, falling back on the repetition, "O my poor people, my poor people, my poor people". And it is incomplete, as the only prayer he actually does intimate here is for more tears, that his head were a spring of water, that he might still be able to weep.

And the answer to *this prayer* – the response to the grief which asks to be able properly to grieve? A spring, a fountain, a river, a raging torrent of tears which do not simply streak a face and fall to the dust but which well up and flood and wash away, leaving nothing – the very stuff out of which this God works his creation.

It is not for nothing that when the church baptises in water it speaks not merely of a washing but of a drowning, not of welling springs but of deep and deadly torrents. That baptism involves a kind of death is not obvious, not least because we tend to smile so much when we baptise. This is, in part, because we are usually baptising infants, and they make us smile, anyway. Gurgling bundles of joy filled with potential and promise are so far from the thought of death as almost to contradict the thought altogether. For are our children not the means by which we cheat death of a total claim on us, the means by which something of us still survives?

But we also smile at a baptism because, properly understood, it is a symbol of life out of death – a new life, a new self. If there is, then, a grief over death hidden somewhere in this fundamental Christian act it cannot be *our* sadness, our loss, because the baptism marks the *end* of death's hold on us. Indeed the death is ours, but the grief is God's own: we are baptised in the flood which is the very tears of God. God's own tearful "O my poor people" is the rising sea which carries the waves of wrath, waves which crash down, and wash away, and drown.

The only question is: if even God is reduced to a torrent of tears, is it then all over? What could console God?

In baptism, and correspondingly in Eucharist, the answer is: God himself. This is not because God is able to talk himself around or see the positive in every negative. The only positive here *is* God himself. As our psalmist put it today, the consolation will be in God's own character as, finally, faithful: God delivers, forgives, re-creates, raises from the dead all for his own name's sake (Psalm 79.9). Our being baptised and our eating and drinking are declarations that out of the flood of tears we have caused and out of a death we have brought about – out of reducing ourselves and others to nothing – this God not only can but *wills* to re-create.

There, then, is nothing "natural" about the Christian confession that God raises the dead. It is not a matter of day following night, or an ecological circle of death and life and death and life again. Jeremiah's grief is real, for the end which causes it is real: O the slain of my poor people. It is an end with life, and with God. It is only if this is the case that there is anything to celebrate, if there is any *gift* of life which wasn't already going to come, as if life naturally followed death. It is the completeness of death and the seizure by grief which lays the ground for the surprise of resurrection.

The mystery at the heart of Christian confession, the hope upon which we stand, is that there is no ending which cannot, in the hands of this God, become a new beginning, no grief which, while not being forgotten, cannot become a new colour in the spectrum of joy.

Though our tears will eventually run dry, God's do not. From them, and God's own desire no longer to grieve, is the promise of restoration and healing.

For this all thanks be to God, Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.
