

Lent 1
9/3/2014

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

Of Idols

According to the internet search engine Google, the items about which Australians most sought information in 2013 were: (1) Paul Walker, (2) Cory Monteith and (3) The new royal baby, Prince George. For those of you who don't know who Walker and Monteith are, they were popular young actors who died in the course of the year. (Most of you can probably place Prince George!). This was in a year in which the Egyptian government was overthrown, Syria tore itself apart in a civil war which threatened to spill into much wider sabre-rattling, a new and popular pope was elected, there was a bombing of the Boston marathon, over 1100 people were killed in a factory fire in Bangladesh and around 6000 people were killed by a cyclone in the Philippines.

It is a matter of amazement to many, but celebrities great and small continually dominate news reports and catch the popular imagination. We are fascinated with movie stars, "reality TV" contestants, musicians, sportspeople, models, and royals. These are they who are pasted on the front pages of magazines at the supermarket checkout. Theirs are the stories which register among the most often viewed pages on newspaper websites. What is called the "cult of celebrity" is very strong with us.

There is an important sense in which the celebrity is a profoundly *religious* phenomenon. Celebrities operate for us as focal points for things we admire or desire, or loath: beauty, vivacity, health and strength, life; or negatively: bad behaviour or stupidity. Devotees and opponents of celebrities foist upon the celebrated person their admiration or contempt for what they admire or despise in him or her, and so in themselves.

This brings us within range of identifying the religious nature of the celebrity. In the middle of the 19th century the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach drew the conclusion that all theology was merely anthropology writ large. Religion is the enacting of our desires or fears for ourselves. We are but shadows of what is perfected in the gods. This is a significant dimension of what goes on in the cult of celebrity.

And so it is important that a celebrity is not merely someone who is famous or infamous. Politicians, for example, are usually famous by virtue of their profession, but they are rarely considered celebrities. And in fact the way in which politicians are *not* celebrities provides us with a deeper appreciation of the religious function of the celebrity.

A recent opinion piece in *The Age* (Feb 13, 2014) ran under the heading, “Why don't you just shut up and act, George Clooney?” George’s offence was that, although “only” an actor, he expressed publicly the opinion that the British Museum should return the Elgin Marbles.¹ The thing about our celebrity idols is that they really only serve their purpose when we are projecting ourselves onto them, and not the other way around. There is a distinct cringe activated in us when actors or musicians or models or royals stop being silent bearers of our dreams and dare to speak to us about how we should be. Those who are idolised for their appearance or their creative abilities or for some other accidental quality can quickly be rejected should they become spokespeople for a social or political cause. One commentator summed up the thoughts of many when she observed: “All the world might be a stage, but Hollywood actors should probably stay off it”.²

In contrast to celebrities, it is the role of politicians to speak on the world stage, and while they will become famous or infamous for doing so they will not become celebrities on whom we can foist our dreams for ourselves, or not for very long. Rather, it is their role to foist upon *us* futures and dreams which we will not all share. *We* create celebrities, but there is a sense in which our leaders create *us* by the way in which they order our world for us. The celebrity is the one who embodies what we desire to be, or in other cases what we do not desire to be. They are *us* writ large – positively and negatively – and so, in Feuerbach’s terms, they serve us as the gods of old served the Greeks and Romans and perhaps all peoples prior to Yahweh’s address to Abraham. It is not for nothing that we speak of a “screen idol” or a “rock idol.” The politician has no such psycho-religious function, for she is not the result of what we have said to her but in fact speaks back to us, necessarily having to resist us at times, for our own good.

Now the point about all this is not celebrities or politicians *per se*, but the phenomenon of *projection*, for this is the profoundly *religious* act. This is what Adam and Eve desire in the eating of the forbidden fruit, and it is what Jesus rejects in the desert temptations. The important thing about projection is that the god itself must be silent; it is only our own voice we desire to hear. We are, as it were, ventriloquists for divine things, giving voice to silent idols.

Our story this morning of the satanic temptations takes place at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and so characterises all that follows in the gospel story. Prior to this account Matthew has been working very hard to identify just who this Jesus is. Dominant in this identification is the title “Son of God” (c.f. 2.15, 3.17). In the first two challenges the devil puts, we hear the meaning of this title put in merely religious terms: “*if* you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread...” “*if* you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the temple top...” In effect, the argument is: make of your identity as “Son of God” whatever you will. In rejecting the invitation to name his own terms for his calling, Jesus refuses the religious option. He refuses to cast divine things in terms of how we might desire them to be. The God who sent him has not been silent but has spoken a vocation for Jesus. Jesus has heard it, and this is enough for the righteousness of the course he is to take.

¹ <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/movies/why-dont-you-just-shut-up-and-act-george-clooney-20140213-32jue.html>

² Emma Young, Sydney Morning Herald July 24 2002
<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/07/23/1027332375437.html>

The third temptation in this morning's reading involves a slight shift of direction but is materially the same as the first two. Those first two challenges invited Jesus to project a meaning onto his vocation as Son of God. The third invites Jesus to project an inappropriate meaning onto Satan himself: "worship *me* and all of this can be yours..." In resisting this temptation, Jesus now stands both as the one who refuses to name his own calling in any way he or others might wish it were and as the one who refuses to allow other things to name themselves according to their own wishes. Jesus refuses to become his or someone else's idea of a god, and refuses to allow someone else to make himself god over him.

We usually hear the story of Jesus' temptations as an account of how Jesus achieved what we usually do not: he was "tempted" and prevailed, whereas we too often succumb. Just leaving it there, however, doesn't tell us much about *what* the temptations are which confront to us. The story of Adam and Eve is well-enough known but, conversely, usually in terms of the sheer *disobedience* of the apple-munching. Yet at least as important as this is what Eve is said to have hoped to *achieve* in this act. This was not keeping the doctor away but becoming like God, knowing what is good and what is evil, being able to name righteousness independently of God.

In this Eve and Adam desire, in effect, to silence God. When our "idols" – our gods – today dare to speak to us, and we draw back in surprise and irritation, we indicate that we, indeed, are children of this First Couple. As they did, so do we. Our idolising of the world around us, as a projection of ourselves onto that world, is a *silencing* of other voices. This may be the celebrity who bears our ideals, or be the dream partner who would meet all our deepest needs, requiring little of us in return; or the job which, if only it were ours, would fulfil our needs for self-expression and cost us nothing; or it may be the child who will achieve (for me) all I failed to do, having no dreams of her own.

In each such instance, we give up the call to live the life given to us with the people given us, and love more what *might* have been. We identify our true selves not here and now – but somewhere else, or as *someone* else: "...[Eve] saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and *that the tree was to be desired to make one wise*", and she took and ate. In contrast, Jesus rests with what he was made to be for God; there is nothing else to be desired – no self-centred recasting of God or himself or the world around him.

This is the life which is honoured by God. As we heard from St Paul this morning, it is also the life offered to us in substitution for the life we have "in Adam" (Romans 5). Having "seen" good and evil, the first thing Adam and Eve do is run and hide – imagining that leafy greens could protect them. Those fig leaves are our hollow dreams and wishes, our withdrawal from a world we wish were otherwise.

At the end of the Eden story God offers these two a more substantial covering – garments of leather to replace the paltry fig leaves. We might say, in Paul's terms, that God offers them Christ – Christ's choices in place of their own.

Covered now in Christ they leave the garden and live in the world as it now is – broken because they are. And yet they are clothed for the elements by God. This is not now necessarily an easy life but it is, indeed, *life* – a being present in the world as it is, a rejoicing and a suffering which both celebrates what is given and mourns what has been lost.

There is no hiding here, no transference to a dreamland for respite, but neither is that necessary. With Jesus we are called to live, to move forward, and not to be paralysed by what might have been “if” we were the children of this God, for we are.

True religion takes place not in another place or the life of another person or with other people better than the ones we actually have, but in a courageous living of the lives given to us and the corresponding call of God to live just *here*. This courage is not a matter of moral heroism but of knowing ourselves to be sons, daughters of this God, as Jesus did, if Adam and Eve did not, chosen before we could choose. If this is our heart, then sin simply becomes *unnecessary*.

By the grace of God, may all his people step forward to embrace such life, and so obey his call, and so know themselves as sons, daughters, of God. Amen.
