

Pentecost 12
31/8/2014

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Psalm 26
Matthew 16:21-27

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Although "righteousness" has become rather a religious word in our language, it is something which is very much at the heart of our being as human persons, whether we are religious or not. In order to exist in communities, and in relation to the natural world around us, it is important for us to know what the "rules of engagement" are and, according to those rules, to live "justly," "rightly". We need to know what is and isn't expected of us in our relationship to the people around us. This can change subtly – and sometimes quite dramatically – from place to place, but it remains the case that the rules are there, and if they are not observed the consequences can be dire. Even if they fail at meeting the expectation, children know what their parents or teachers expect of them, mothers know what the community expects of them, bosses know what their employees expect of them, criminals know what society expects of them. In each case, quite apart from any religious connotations, we might speak of a "righteousness" or a "justice" which is simply knowing which rules apply where, and *our* righteousness or justice is measured according to our ability or willingness to live or work or operate according to those rules. I am righteous, or just, if I read the rules correctly and order myself according to them; I am unrighteous or unjust if I don't observe what is expected of me. At this level it does not matter what the rules are, only that I know them and obey them.

If the terms "righteous" and "just" can be used in this way let us return to our beatitude for today: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for *righteousness*' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." If it *is* the case that our lives are governed by various rules and expectations, and that our *meeting* these expectations is the source of our security in our communities, how is it that we might be *persecuted* for this righteousness – persecuted for living according to what is broadly expected of us?

At one level, this will be because of the clash of moral systems: A "religious" moral system will clash in certain ways with other sets of rules, and this will bring suffering, if the opposing culture is strong enough to resist and to punish those who act differently. Here suffering for righteousness' sake is easily understood: I do the right, and it conflicts with someone else's morals or priorities, and I suffer for it.

But there is a deeper sense of conflict over righteousness in Jesus' beatitude here, which is indicated by his reference to "the kingdom of heaven" (the "kingdom of God").

To "have" the kingdom of God – for the kingdom of God to be "ours" – what does this mean? It cannot simply mean that we "believe" in God. Our sense that God exists does nothing actually to relate God to us. I believe in the Queen of England (Australia!), but this makes very little difference to my life (all the monarchists' arguments notwithstanding!). In no real sense does she "reign over us". We get a little closer, perhaps, if we imagine that believing in God implies its own moral code – its own set

of moral principles and required actions. In this way God impacts on our lives in ways different from the impact of other authorities; we might begin to imagine that here we are in the realm of God – when things are done as God wishes.

This is, perhaps, the most common understanding of how God is present to us as “king”, or reigns over us. If God is calling the shots, it should be visible in the way I use the resources at my disposal – my time, talents, money, body. We imagine that it is possible to read the kingdom to which a person belongs by seeing what they do.

But to push more deeply here into divine righteousness it will help to recall what we noted earlier in our reflections on the Beatitudes: that the first hearer of these blessings, and the one who truly embodies them, is Jesus himself.

Both within the church and without, of course, Jesus is touted as the great moral teacher. In particular, his “golden rule” – love others as you would have them love you – appears as the proper summation of all ethics. Yet Jesus often offends our moral sensibilities. It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs, he tells a Gentile woman. You will always have the poor with you, he tells another to justify the apparent waste of a great resource on Jesus himself. And there is plenty of other things we hear on his lips with which we would want to argue.

Perhaps more importantly, we need to keep in mind that those who most doggedly pursued him – even to the point of crucifying him – would have agreed with him on most of the things which offend us today. What is going on here, morally?

At the same time as Jesus gets hard-line on various religious and moral questions, he acts as if to contradict himself. While calling the people to a higher righteousness, he spends time with the local sinners. He crosses over from moral righteousness to an unrighteousness of association; he interprets ancient scriptural precepts through a different lens, either intensifying them or relativising them to higher priorities. As we read about these exchanges we tend to imagine that, each time, Jesus is simply smarter, more morally profound, than his opponents, and that he simply always gets it right.

But perhaps closer to the mark is that Jesus is free from the anxiety of being right in our moral sense. That is, he does not have to justify everything he does by referring to the whole of the rest of what God commands, fitting his actions neatly into “God’s plan.” He is, rather, simply free from the need to do this because this is not the sense of the “kingdom of heaven”, kingdom of God, which he embodies. Jesus lives as if his righteousness comes not from his always doing the right thing, but from his being the child of the one who sent him. Jesus does not know himself righteous by being able to list all the good things he does. He rather knows himself righteous because the Father loves him. It is the Father who makes the Son what he is, and nothing else.

This is not easy to get our heads around. We still want to rush in and say, “Yes, but...”. The “But” is that we still want it to be that Jesus still did the right thing: yes, but Jesus was still morally upright. *But* we want this not so much to preserve the moral status of Jesus as to have for ourselves a moral guide who can tell us what to do, whether it be Jesus or a reliable set of laws. And why do we want this? Because we only understand the kingdom of God as living according to a particular moral code.

Does it not seem too hard to live life not *knowing* that we are right? This is not simply a religious question. The rules are everywhere, and we imagine ourselves safe according to our compliance with the rules. If we need to defend ourselves, we make reference to those rules; this is what our courts are for.

And not knowing that we are right is not a religious question simply in terms of earning our salvation. Our lives are full of decisions in which we feel we have to justify or defend ourselves. When is the right time to turn off the life support machine? When is it time to push for the nursing home, and who decides? How should we read this Scriptural text? Do I need to leave him, or her? How much money should the church spend on its buildings? In these types of decisions we invoke all the guidance we can, and then we decide – if we are going to be responsible to the demands made of us. What justifies our decision? We can point to all kinds of justifications. And others can point to counter-arguments.

Where can we find peace in all this? Where is the assurance of our righteousness? For we cannot *know* that we have got it right, other than to arrogate to ourselves the right to judge what is right and wrong – the prerogative of God, the very thing after which Adam and Eve strove in taking the apple.

The thing is that the kingdom of heaven is a realm within which God's hand cannot be forced. God cannot be forced to bless, and neither to condemn.

This would normally be a terrifying thing, for most of our lives are a matter of “forcing” things – setting things in place, securing ourselves and those in our circle, making plans, averting difficulties, securing our future. God, however, is a free agent in all this and not a constant for use in our life equations.

This would normally be a terrifying thing, where it not that God's own promise is to be *our* God – to build up and not to tear down. If we cannot rely on God to honour our own sense of what is right and wrong, we also cannot rely on God to agree with our own condemnation of ourselves or of others.

To live within the kingdom of God is to declare God's freedom with respect to us. And this will, in the end, bring persecution. For we will find ourselves in conflict with “the rules” – in the church as much as beyond it. The righteousness for which we are to suffer is the righteousness which comes from God, the righteousness which creates and enables and does not destroy or limit.

God claims us as his own, and this is our righteousness. If we are loved by God in this way, then we are freed from fear of judgement and free to do as God himself does: to love and to set right.

For the gift of a righteousness which the world cannot create but so desperately needs, all thanks and praise be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and always, Amen.
