

Sunday 15
12/7/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Galatians 2:15-21

Psalm 30

Mark 5:13-20

Why ethics is not enough

[Notes in lieu of a sermon, in response to an [article by Lorraine Parkinson](#) in Crosslight, July 2015]

In her response to Randall Prior in July Crosslight, Lorraine Parkinson takes issue not only with the ecumenical impetus which saw the birth of the Uniting Church but more generally with Christian faith and its reading of the significance of the person of Jesus. Her intention is to propose a better basis upon which to build human unity. Yet her dismissal of the church's traditional christological understanding of the possibility of such unity in favour of an ethical basis for it – even an ethic purportedly from the lips of Jesus – misses the point of the kind of focus on Jesus the church has taken since the beginning.

This is indicated in her summation of the “greatest challenge” St Paul faces in his evangelical work as the death of the Messiah. This is not Paul's greatest challenge, nor the New Testament's as a whole. The theological problem – the *surprise* – of the New Testament is not that the Good dies, but that it dies at the hands of the good, the people of God. In this the elect act in a way expected of the Gentiles.

But this is no mere irony. The crucial Christological key here is that the crucifixion of Jesus was an act of piety on the part of the religious leadership, a *gift to God* which totally misread what Jesus represented. The fact of such an error is the reason even something like the Sermon on the Mount provides no basis for human unity. The hearing of the Sermon leads to the death of the preacher: precisely the kind of sectarian human division Lorraine seeks to avoid. This being the case for Jesus, how is it conceivable that a return to the Sermon will now work? Only wishful thinking, tinged with not a little critique of the ethical failures of others, could imagine it possible.

While Lorraine proposes discovering a general ethical basis for creating human unity, at the heart of the Christian story is a critique of such bases: the failure of ethical systems to give us certainty that we have acted righteously. The resurrection was a judgement on the ethical judgement of those who crucified Jesus. The problem of human dividedness – of which Jesus' death is the epitome – is not religious sectarianism but the general human malaise: the presumption that we are able to judge ourselves as having acted righteously, the catastrophe of Eden's apple.

Paul's genius was not dreaming up the sacrificial theory for the death of Jesus but the realisation that our sense for what is right or wrong is unreliable: it is not possible to justify ourselves before God by keeping our understanding of religious or moral the law. We cannot know ourselves to be right before God, apart God declaring us so.

Thus Lorraine's dismissal of the prayer for unity in John's gospel as mere church theology much after the fact also misses the point. Whether or not Jesus actually spoke these words they are important because the church knew – and occasionally still remembers – that human unity is a gift of God, not an ethical achievement of Christians or people of any other faith or no-faith.

It is indeed true that the church continues to get its message and its unity wrong but we ought to take this failure with utter seriousness. Given that a community with a message of reconciliation at its very heart has failed to achieve human unity, what confidence can we possibly have that simply alighting upon some ethical system – even the lauded Sermon on the Mount (or, at least, bits of it) – will get us any further? A proponent for any such system is no better placed for success than Jesus, and in fact much less so.

For this reason the gospel is not an ethical program. It is a word of ethical realism. While we are constantly called to love mercy and live humbly before God – and must heed this call – even our obedient response does not finally create human unity, for things are too broken. Rather, in the face of the same kind of rejection Jesus himself met, such an ethic testifies to a unity which does not yet exist but which we wait for God to call into being – in spite of us, but for us.

In this way, the gospel wrapped up in the church's traditional confession is beyond ethics. It is no mere call to be good, but the promise of a goodness made out of human ethical failure: This is my body broken *by* you, given now that you might be healed.

The “authentic role” of the Uniting Church, with all Christian communities, is not merely issuing the call to love, or even being loving. It is to point to a source of unity and reconciliation which has comprehended us, and yet still loves us. In this the church has something not simply to say to the world but to celebrate in spite of the fact that the world can be as deaf to the news as we are ourselves.
