

Sunday 16
19/7/2015

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 5:1-10
Psalm 48
Matthew 22:41-46

God's fallen idols

The idol has a special place in our culture – perhaps in all cultures. We seem to need them, whether they be political, intellectual, fashion or music idols, or whatever. Idols image for us something we think to be central, most important or most support to us. To borrow the language of 1 Samuel, we desire that a “king” be appointed over us, to govern, to lead, to protect, to define (recalling the request for a king in 1 Samuel 8).

With this fascination comes the phenomenon of the *fallen* idol – the great one upon whom we projected our own images and expectations but who turns out to be less than we thought. This is not a desirable roll to play: no one wants to be held up as the warning to others about looking like one thing but being another, whether or not you've actually encouraged others to idolise you.

Many of our idols – the smart ones, or the lucky ones – will avoid public exposure in this way but all idols, human or divine, will finally prove less than we need or want them to be.

The dynamic of idols – our need for them and their inevitable failure – is central to the Scriptural story.

So far as the story of David's rise to the kingship goes, it is so far so good. Our reading this morning is something of a climax in David's story, towards which the whole thrust of the narrative has been leading and which now is achieved as the last resistance from Saul's supporters is overcome and David establishes himself in the city of Jerusalem. It has been a remarkable story, with David effectively becoming king through no real effort on his own part other than simply staying alive: Saul died at the hands of the Philistines, Saul's only successor was killed by two of his captains, Saul's general was killed by David's own – all of this against David's wishes – and finally the northern part of the kingdom has come to acknowledge that David is the only realistic option for king. Our reading this morning ends with the declaration that “David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.”

For David and for the kingship, then, all is going very well. In fact, it will be found in the end to have gone so well that David and the kingship will come to take on unprecedented significance for Israel. The heritage of Moses and Mount Sinai is now complemented by David and Mount Zion, so that when the early church comes to reflect on the ministry of Jesus, Moses and the law are somewhat overshadowed by the kingship of God and the promise of a new Jerusalem.

And yet we know the story, and so we know that for David personally things will slowly unravel. The story of trust and faithfulness which has been David's story to this point will become complicated by the effect which being king has on the man himself. With the freedoms of being king comes the temptation to arrogance – claiming more for oneself than is appropriate. Perhaps we have seen a foreshadow of that in the treatment of the blind and the lame in our reading this morning; we will see in more detail what this looks like in the weeks to come.

For now, however, we will focus on what David “stands for” as king. In many respects the life of David reflects that of Adam (with Eve) in the garden creation myth – and many Old Testament scholars think that the story of Adam is told with the experiences of David in mind. For in David we see a figure to whom all is given, and who first revels before God in what he has received but then reaches out to take more than was offered. At the same time, David is not destroyed. He continues as king, and so do his successors for 400 years – long enough for Israel to imagine that he and his line were indeed favoured by God.

But David’s *failures* are not forgotten. And so the question has to be asked why his failures do not see him also cast aside. What is happening, that David and his kingship is not rejected? The answer is also given in the story of Adam and Eve. In the creation myth Adam and Eve, in the same way as David, are given dominion over all the world and live in direct relationship to God before overreaching and being cast down. And yet, even though God’s judgement is then spoken and hardship now becomes a dominant mark of their existence, still they stand – clothed now by garments of leather given by God to replace their own flimsy fig leaves. As we will hear in a few weeks, this corresponds very closely to the judgement on David following his taking of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband – the sword will ever be active in David’s house and, yet, he will remain king. David is not rejected, but his existence takes a different shape and style on account of the failures which are to come. It is perhaps this historical memory of David which colours the pre-history account of Adam in the Garden.

But, in the broader context of the Scripture’s reflection on the nature of the human being, David’s moral failings ought not to bother us, and neither should we be distracted by the form of the story as a story about a monarchy. It is, of course, about a kingship. But it is also something of a parable about every one of us. For the question is not the seemingly obvious one as to whether David is fit to be king, but whether *any* one of us would be. The answer of the Scripture writers, reflecting David’s own story in the legend of the Fall in the Garden, is No – the favoured one(s) will overreach. As it was for Adam, so it was for David. Or, as it was for David, so it *must have been* for Adam – and so also for us, for we are the same as they, before the same God.

And so wondering about the quality of David’s kingship, and whether David or we *deserve* God’s favour is to ask the wrong question. For the story of David’s failure as king, and the story of the failure in the Garden, is written not from the perspective of failure itself but from the inexplicable experience that the fallen, favoured one is *still* favoured. (How this can be so when, for example, it didn’t apply in the case of Saul, we will see in more detail in a couple of weeks when we come to God’s covenant with David). The amazing thing about the story of Eden – taking it at face value – is that the Scriptures do not end with the sad departure of Adam and Eve. And the reason is that it is that Adam and Eve still stand after exiting Eden, and David’s line continues in the kingship despite the fact that he and his descendants continuing to failure before God.

This is the critical thing, and the key to making sense of these stories: David *is* untrustworthy, *and yet* trusted to carry on. It is this situation which provides the answer to what is perhaps *the* question motivating the writers of Scripture, put so succinctly by the prophet Ezekiel: can such dry bones as these live (Ezekiel 37.3)? Can life come out of what is deathly? Can human fear and loathing and arrogance be overcome? Can divine faithfulness endure human unfaithfulness? The answer is, Yes: we who created are after God’s image and so are now all “literally” *fallen* images – fallen *idols* – nevertheless are raised again to our feet.

And here are the first intimations of the gospel. Although the story of David is the story of any one of us, it echoes another story which is strangely like ours, and yet is not. This is the story of Jesus, who comes after David and yet who finally defines David – as Jesus teases in his game of words with the Pharisees in our gospel reading this morning (off RCL: Matthew 22.41-46). If the story of David or Adam in their failure to stand properly before God might be said to be our story, the gospel is about Jesus who perfects what it means to stand before God. He also receives the life of the favoured one. As the true image – or idol – he suffers the fall into the death of the rejected and godless. He encapsulates David's story and Adam's story, and ours. Yet his new existence as the risen Lord is not the qualified and always potentially miserable existence under judgement which becomes the lot of Adam and David. Rather, he exceeds them, for in him is death and judgement put behind, no longer colouring and limiting his future.

We are Davids and Bathshebas, Adams and Eves, called and gifted, fallen and tarnished images. And yet – the most important and surprising thing – we are not discarded. In Jesus is the both act and the promise of perfection. What he suffers is our failure, and that God restores him would only be good news for *him* were it not that Christ himself returns to those who sacrificed him with the healing words: “peace be with you”.

This offer of peace to those who persecuted him is the beginning of our restoration. In this way we meet ourselves as we are – falling very short of God's glory – and yet also *overcome*, forgiven, embraced. In this way we meet for the first time the God who created us in his image, and restores that image when we fall.

For the story of Jesus which meets, embraces and sets right our story, all thanks be to God, now and always. Amen.
