

Sunday 20
16/8/2015

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

Psalm 51

John 19:1-7

Our true story

The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves – our “internal narratives” – are the basis for how we live in the world around us. They place us, give us meaning, set an agenda for us, open up possibilities or close them off. The things we are likely to do or say are rooted in these stories. Because of this, we can also read something of a person’s internal narrative about themselves from the way they behave.

David can take – probably rape – Bathsheba, have her husband killed, and imagine that the matter is dealt with. What story is he telling himself, that he imagines that this all “works”?

David is king, probably at the height of his powers. The palace is established, the ark has come to Jerusalem, and the promise of an eternal throne has been heard. The security of the borders needs to be maintained but this no longer requires David’s oversight and can be entrusted to his generals. His life approaches one of leisure. He is then, on a number of levels, *free*. And in freedom he acts – an almost absolute freedom from the obligations of moral leadership and observance of custom: freedom with a woman’s chastity, freedom with a man’s life. His is a freedom to act with impunity, he apparently imagines. This is the story he tells himself. David acts as a king can: according to desire, almost without fear of contradiction. Yet, of course, there is some fear here. Uriah dies because David fears discovery; David knows that others will not affirm this degree of freedom. But Uriah *does* die and so the threat of discovery seems to be dealt with. This would all the more reinforce for David his freedom – not only to transgress against command and convention but seemingly to do so and to get away with it.

David acts as if the only story which matters is the one which he himself tells. And this would seem to be so until Nathan appears. What Nathan does, in effect, is *re-story* David. This applies both to the method and in its effect. The method is one of distraction. David is invited into another story, seemingly bearing no particular relation to his own. In his focus on the rich man’s theft of the poor man’s ewe David both forgets himself and becomes himself. His own actions are not even in view at the outset, and so he is free to act as a king should in response to Nathan’s tale, “becoming himself” and declaring right judgement on the rich man. The trick, of course, is that having forgotten himself, David has declared judgement on himself. Human judgement and divine judgement are in accord here: David is guilty. To recall our reflection from last week: the blessed one has over-reached, and knows it.

In our gospel reading this morning we heard a kind of echo of Nathan’s “You are the man” accusation in Pilate’s presentation of Jesus to the crowds: “Here is the man” (John 19.5). It doesn’t matter whether there is intended to be a link between the two stories in the mind of the gospel writer; David and Jesus are each playing the role of “the man” or, more helpfully, the human creature of this particular God.

On Pilate's lips "Here is the man" is both a declaration and a question. For the gospel writer John this is a much stronger statement than "Here he is". We are rather to hear: "This is *the* man, *the* human being"; *here* is the human story (we might recall here the parallels, or type, we have noted between David, Adam and Jesus here). The implied question in Pilate's declaration is, then, "Do you agree? What is your judgement on this?" The judgement of the crowds, expressed in the call for crucifixion, is that Jesus is not *the* human being, and so not the sign of the presence of God in the world, not the "image of God" (Genesis 1.27f). David was judged because he was human – too human, in the negative sense of fallible. Jesus is judged here because if this is what humanity looks like, it is unbearable. The story the crowd tells itself does not include the kind of freedom which Jesus represents. For like David's, Jesus' own "internal story", if we dare to try to reconstruct it from his actions, is also about freedom. But it is a different kind of freedom from that exercised by David. For Jesus freedom is in knowing what he is given to be, called to do, required to say, and what will "justify" what he does. It is the freedom of one who knows himself in relation to the one who commissioned him. It is the freedom of having received in such a way that he remains bound to the giver in order to receive more. By contrast, once David had received, he acted as if his own account of himself was the only one which now mattered: the gift separated him from the giver. Jesus' story, of course, conflicts with others' account of him and – more importantly – conflicts with their account of themselves. This is how he comes to be standing before the angry crowd. This conflict renders the judgement, "He is *not* the man; this is not what God requires", and the sentence, Crucify.

From the perspective of the resurrection, which returns our attention to the crucified Jesus, in the judgement of Jesus we are at the Uriah level of the story. The crucifixion is out attempt to cover up what Jesus' own story has exposed: the great gap between the kingdom of God as it was embodied in all that Jesus said and did, and our own orderings of the world. Uriah lies dead and the story is over until Nathan arrives to tell a different version of the story. Jesus lies dead until the resurrection comes. Jesus' resurrection, then, is a kind of parable like Nathan's story of the stolen sheep, doing the work of re-storying.

But now the problem is deeper, and so the story much more wide-reaching. In the case of David and Nathan, the re-storying "re-inserts" God. David has ignored God – we might even go so far as to say *killed* God – but specifically for *David's* own sake. This is an important, but relatively low-level "moral" failure – living as if there were no God, knowing that in fact there is. God's "being there" is a matter of inconvenience and so is conveniently overlooked. In the case of Jesus, however, the problem is much deeper. The crucifixion takes place not in order to deny God, but to honour God. Jesus is executed because he is thought to have misrepresented God; the crucifixion is an act of piety on the part of those who demand it. For their part, *God* requires the crucifixion. Whereas what was bad in David killed Uriah, what is "good" in his religious opponents requires that Jesus be killed.

And so the pressing question is: is there any hope for those whose attempts at *good* works even deny the presence and call of God? Here the whole summation of as Christian faith being about doing good is called into question: can we be sure that our assessment of what is good actually gets "Good" right? And is it enough simply to declare, "I did the best I could" when religious piety kills the Lord of life? It is not a brave person who declares his or her works good. It is an arrogant one, for such a judgement is God's alone.

This is the re-storying done by Jesus' resurrection. Here the crucifixion of Jesus by wrong-headed piety is not just forgiven but *made* a good thing, and so it is not forgotten. We *remember* the body and the blood because the body broken *by* us becomes the body broken *for* us. There can be no forgiving and forgetting, because it is the *good* the pious do which is the problem. The crucifixion of Jesus cannot be forgotten without allowing ourselves to imagine that we might still be "good enough", that we've done well "enough", that we've done "our best", and that this is all that matters. For all our talk about justification by grace through faith, there are few of us who are not at heart quietly *earning* our standing before God, resting in a job well done rather than in the gift of God's love.

We must, of course, "do," act; only the dead are free of this obligation. And we must, to the best of our ability, do the right, seeking to align our actions with God's call. But we are not our own judges. We can neither justify our sin, as David wanted to, nor guarantee the righteousness of our good works, as Jesus' executioners imagined they could. We stand before God only because, in the bad and the good, God stands for us, not simply wanting that we be good, but making it that we are. This is the gospel, the free humanity of Jesus made our very own, no judgement to fear.

For such a story, exposing and re-working the untruths in the stories we tell ourselves, all thanks be to God. Amen.
