

Easter 2
3/4/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 5:27-32

Psalm 150

Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

Forgiveness as getting sin right

Many of you will probably, at some stage of your Christian walk, come across the so-called “four spiritual laws” – or perhaps have even promulgated them. These “laws” seek to give an account of the why and wherefore of Christian belief by giving an account of human sinfulness and God’s response to this condition. They are often printed on small pamphlets, and run something like this

1. God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life. (John 3:16, John 10:10)
2. The human being is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, we cannot know and experience God's love and plan for our lives. (Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23)
3. Jesus Christ is God's only provision for our sin. Through him we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives. (Romans 5:8, I Corinthians 15:3-6, John 14:6)
4. We must individually receive Jesus Christ as saviour and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives. (John 1:12, Ephesians 2:8,9, John 3:18, Revelation 3:20)

This expresses something of what perhaps most Christians would consider to be the essentials of the gospel of salvation, linking divine grace to human sinfulness. But, at the same time, it is rather a bland set of principles. Or, perhaps more to the point, it reads *like* a set of principles – mere principles. There is not much in this listing of the “laws” that engages *me*; it’s all about “God”, “Jesus” and human beings *in general*.

But when we look to the preaching of the disciples, we discover a much less abstract dealing with the matter. Our text from Acts today revolves around a very short sermon preached by the apostles, consisting of only two lines, each of which is critical:

“The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree”, and

“God has exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins”

Consider the first line of their sermon: “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree”. The first thing to note is *not* the reference to the resurrection. For the moment, the important point is in the second clause: “whom you killed by hanging him on a tree” – “whom *you* killed.” The preaching of the resurrection of Jesus is directed at *those who are responsible* for his persecution and execution. This is not simply *information* about what God might have done – it implicates those who hear it: the one whom God has raised is the one you have killed. This makes the resurrection highly significant for those who have killed Jesus. To sharpen it one further step, the apostles’ preaching declares to Jesus’ executioners, “In the resurrection God has judged as false your judgement of Jesus”.

We need to keep in mind this “you” is not us but the religious authorities to whom Peter and the other apostles are speaking. This matters because it puts an entirely different spin on the meaning of the resurrection. It’s not here some uplifting message from the other side that we might have life after death. In fact, “Jesus is risen” is *not* good news for the religious authorities, but actually *bad* news: you did not know what you were doing; your best judgement has been judged and found to be horribly wrong. “Jesus is risen” is not of itself a declaration of the forgiveness of sins, but gives rise to the *naming* and *identifying* of human sin. The next line following on from what we heard this morning goes on to say: “When the council heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.” They understood what is being implied here: that Israel has crucified God’s Christ. The preaching of the resurrection is not here *information* but *accusation*.

If indeed Jesus has been raised, and such a divine judgement has been delivered, the question then becomes, what will God do about the crucifixion? What will he do *with* the risen Jesus?

This brings us to the second part of the apostles’ short sermon: “God has exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour *that he might give repentance* to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” We needn’t get too caught up with such questions as whether Jesus was first raised and then exalted to God’s right hand, or whether God actually has a right hand, or whatever. The important point is that Jesus is given this “status” *in order* to be able to give repentance and forgiveness.

Notice again how this is different from some of our more familiar salvation talk, such as “Jesus died for our sins”. In the preaching of the apostles we hear not that Jesus died “for” our sin but *on account of* our sin (here, the sin of “Israel”), and that he is *exalted* in order that repentance might occur and sin be forgiven. The most important thing in understanding what this means is that the second half of the apostles’ sermon not be separated from the first. The raising of Jesus is the demonstration of his innocence. That Jesus is then exalted as judge, *in order to bring forgiveness*, is to say that the innocent victim returns to his persecutors. “This Jesus, whom *you* crucified, has been raised and made *your* judge, that *you* might repent *and be forgiven*”

This word is spoken not to us – for in fact we weren’t there – but to those who were in fact involved. (We’ll get back to us in a moment!). The word of forgiveness is spoken by the victim to his oppressors; the religious authorities’ salvation is to be found in recognising Jesus as their victim, and receiving forgiveness *from him*.

As such, the forgiveness with which the apostles are here concerned is not a “spiritual” forgiveness of a general human sinfulness but a very concrete and specific forgiveness arising out of a very concrete and specific failure. We might be declaring a truth if we announce that human beings are sinners; but this not very *interesting*. We may be declaring a truth if we announce that Jesus is risen; but this also, is not a very interesting truth. We might be declaring a truth if we announce that God forgives sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus; but even this is not going to get us very far by itself. The preaching of the apostles is about the specific failure of specific people, and so a specific possibility of forgiveness: *you* have done *this*, but *forgiveness* for that is offered. Salvation is intrinsic to – inextricably wrapped up with – the specifics of our failures. It is only resurrection illumination which reveal those specifics.

As an aside: This is why the confession of sin in our liturgy usually appears after the preaching of the word. We must hear what we guilty of before we can confess a real failure. This opportunity is greatly reduced if the confession is only the second thing which takes place in the liturgy, as the standard order of service usually has it.

The apostles' preaching of the resurrection invites us to discover not a general theory of atonement but the very concrete and specific claim that our hope is to be found in our victims. This is the scandalous suggestion which enrages the religious council before which the apostles stand and preach. Good Methodists know this already in another form: "And can it be that *I* should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood – me, who caused his pain, me, who him to death pursued?" We are saved by Jesus only if we have pursued him to death: our salvation is intrinsic to our sin.

Now, of course, only one small part of one generation, in one place, has had the dubious honour of pursuing Jesus to death. What then of us who watch those events from this great distance? The dynamic of forgiveness does not change, nor the scandal of it all. "Inasmuch as you do it to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it to me" (cf. Matthew 25.40, 45). We must conclude that Jesus really meant this(!), if the preaching of the apostles about the meaning of the resurrection and exaltation is true.

Generalised talk about human sinfulness – such we see in something like the four spiritual laws – smudges too much what is at stake by lifting it out of real events and actions. And so generalised talk of the offer of forgiveness has very little to do with actual forgiveness, which brings with it real conviction of sin. The church's faith in the risen Jesus is not about another world, another time, another place and neither is it about no particular time or place. The risen Jesus as the source of forgiveness for those who judged and crucified him is a question mark over our own particular judgements and the impact they have on others. The possibility of forgiveness begins with our recognising that there are real, tangible, inter-personal, political, economic things to be forgiven. This requires being confronted with those who've suffered through these things, at the hands of those of us who have benefitted from them. There is no reconciliation without truth-telling: First and Second peoples, Arabs and Jews, culpable churches and their child-victims, violent men and their families, Synods and congregations, and so on.

But at the same time it is, in fact, impossible to unravel the mess of fractured human relationships, because we are all variously victims and oppressors. And so, at one level, all the gospel can call us to, is honesty about our predicament. As it does this, however, the gospel also points beyond *our* ability to see a resolution of our brokenness – pointing to the capacity of *God* to live in the world, to make it his own, and to present his own life in the world back to us as *our* own.

This last point is the good news. While we *must* make our best efforts to redress our wrongs, our success will only be limited. But if what harm we do to Jesus' brothers and sisters is indeed done to him (recalling again Matthew 25), then, ultimately, he will be in a position to grant the forgiveness which they – or we as *their* victims – cannot. The word of grace *is* that our sins against others are forgiven by the one who forgives *their* sins against us, for his life, and so his ability to forgive and set right, will become ours.

It is only when we hand it all over to the God who reigns over death and decay *to heal it* that we will begin to see both who we are and what an extraordinary thing God will yet make of us.

In this Easter season, may our eyes be opened both to our great need, and to the gift of God's healing work. Amen.
