

Pentecost
15/5/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Romans 8:14-17

Psalm 104

John 14:8-17, 25-27

The great work of the church

“Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”

Are these not very troubling words, considering some of the things Jesus is said to have done: healings, nature miracles, resuscitations from the dead?

Our immediate thought would then be that this is just the kind of thing we too are expected to perform. Yet such things as these we do not do.

The next step is then to accuse ourselves or others because, if Jesus spoke the truth about what his disciples would be able to do, something must have gone badly wrong: we do not have enough faith, are not spiritual enough, are not obedient enough in order to be able to exercise the power which Jesus exercised, the power to do such “greater works”.

Yet, in fact, when Jesus comes actually to *talk* about the work he came to do, things like the miracles don’t really feature at all. According to Jesus, *the work of the Son is to make God the Father known*. The opening prologue of the gospel concludes, “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (1.18). And we hear this kind of thing repeated again and again in John’s gospel. The things of the Father have been entrusted in their entirety to the Son (5.22), who thereby brings the Father to the world: “if you knew me, you would know my Father also” (8.19); “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14.8). Jesus attends not to his own agenda, but to that of the Father (5.19, 8.38; 12.48-50; 14.10; 17.8); he speaks what he has heard from the Father, and his word is the Father’s (8.25-28, 14.24, 15.15). Whereas *our* focus will usually be on the *power* to do great works (or our apparent lack of power as a church), Jesus’ focus is on the *purpose* of the works – the revelation of the Father. This is not to rule out the possibility of such miracles still happening today, but it is to say that miracles aren’t the point. The miracles point to something else. John speaks of Jesus’ miracles as *signs* – things which point *beyond* themselves, through Jesus to the Father who sent him.

It may indeed be the case that Christ’s church doesn’t do the works that Jesus did, and certainly not greater works than he did. Yet this is not because we lack miraculous power. It is because we very easily fall into the trap of thinking that miraculous power is what it is all about: power to change things, to “make a difference”, to “have an impact”.

We might not cast it in terms of wanting to be able to perform miracles; in denominations like ours, at least, we imagine ourselves too “mature” and “progressive” to expect miracles! The power we seek might be social, by becoming a welcoming community; or aesthetic, in a certain style of building or music; or cultural, by cleverly manipulating the icons of the age; or political, seeking to make a high profile impact in the surrounding community. We look for the “hook” which will re-catch all those fish which have escaped the net of the church. We must admit that there is not a little of this

in our current thinking about what our congregation ought to do with the resources at its disposal.

But the question which arises for the church from this text is not in the first instance, “Why do you not have the power, have the magic?” but “Do you *know* what magic is?” In terms of our gospel text, the question can be put this way: “are you able to let your work as individuals and a church to be simply to continue with Jesus’ work of making the Father known?” The problem here is *not* that which we might have with the word “Father”. The question is about whether Jesus’ own task of making known the one who sent him is sufficient also for us today. Are we willing to trust the future of the church to such a seemingly impotent action?

This is a question we must answer, at least if we imagine ourselves somehow to be the church of Christ.

Of course, I haven’t said anything specific about what this might look like in our life as a church. In fact it may not be possible from surface features to distinguish between the church which longs after lost power and the church which simply understands and continues in its true work. The church whose purpose is to continue to work in the Spirit for the revealing of the Father will certainly have social and aesthetic and cultural and political dimensions. Yet it will differ from the power-seeking church in the way that being *led* differs from being *driven*. A led church does not quite know where it is heading, other than that it is to the place where God is; a driven church has a specific goal in mind which it must hit, whatever the cost.

A led church differs from a driven church in the way that *hope* differs from *optimism*. Christian hope does not know the shape of its future but trusts in the one who has promised; optimism knows what it wants and expects to get it.

A hopeful church differs from an optimistic church in the way that the *uncertain* differ from the *anxious* in the face of the same challenges and threats. The uncertain simply do not know what the outcome of any particular situation might be; the anxious are afraid of particular outcomes.

The uncertain but trusting church differs from the anxious and fearful church in the way that getting *radical* differs from becoming *reactionary*. The radical church knows its calling, and is happy to step out in response to that call despite what it sees going on around it; the reactionary church is shoved from pillar to post by every change to which it imagines it must react.

It is worth asking ourselves from time to time why it is that certain things dominate our conversation about our churches, or feature so prominently on our meeting agendas and so occupy so much of our time. “You will do even greater things than these”. Not a little of what occupies us is the drivenness, optimism, anxiety and reaction which develops in us if we imagine that Jesus was effective because he had a great bag of tricks, and now, in his absence, *if only* we knew where that he left that bag!

But the effectiveness of Jesus was in his trust in the one who sent him, in his willingness to be named by the Father’s address to him, and in his being willing simply to point back to the Father.

This is the extraordinary thing about the church – its existence arises out of something so impractical as the relationship between the Father and the Son at God’s heart.

What has all this to do with the gift of the Holy Spirit, which we mark today with the festival of Pentecost? The church has historically understood that the to-ing and fro-ing

between the Father and the Son is the work of the Holy Spirit – even *is* the Holy Spirit. What passes from Father to Son and Son to Father is Spirit.

This is the Spirit God gives us: not “power” to do “works of power”, a kind of divine weapon in our hand, but God’s own heart: the love the Father has for the Son, and the Son for the Father.

This is what makes the church, and is also what our life as church is to *be* – a sharing in that pointing to and from God, a sharing in the Spirit, a sharing in God. And so Jesus says to us in our anxious reactions to our apparent powerlessness in the world,

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. Do and be as I have done and been. What I am, and what I have done, is the way to the Father, the way to the truth and the life you so earnestly seek. If you know me, you will know the Father also, for the Father will send the Spirit, that you might be where I am, and know the Father as I know the Father.

May the one who promised this indeed send us this Spirit that we may be where he is, do what he does, and share in his peace.

Amen.
