

Pentecost 12
7/8/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Psalm 33

Luke 12:32-40

God's present absence

[This sermon steps for a moment out of our series on Galatians although, as you will read, Paul's arguments there are important here as well!]

Today's reading asks us, "What are you waiting for, what are you expecting?"

We spend a lot of time waiting, expecting things. We wait for the birth of a new baby. We wait or look forward to retirement. Perhaps we look forward to our birthday or wait for our health to return to what it should be. And all of this type of waiting is usually pretty active. We get the nursery ready for the baby. We save for our holiday, or plan for retirement, or send out invitations for the party. There is work to be done in connection with this kind of waiting.

We might call this type of expectation "penultimate" – these are "not quite ultimate" things for which we wait. Their penultimacy is linked to their predictability. They are all the little expectations in our life about which we know basically what and when to expect them. A baby *might* decide that 40 weeks is just too long to spend in so cramped a space, or she might have heard something about what it's like out here and so puts off the inevitable for a few days longer than expected, but we usually know pretty much when it's all going to happen. We know when we're likely to retire – in my case, only 6911 sleeps – or how long it is to whatever special day we might be looking forward to.

But there's another type of expectation we could call an "ultimate" expectation; in fact there just two of these ultimate expectations. One is that we can expect to die. The evidence to hand is that this is pretty much inevitable. The other ultimate expectation is that God will come.

These ultimate expectations are different from the normal, little penultimate ones we live with. They differ in two ways. In the first case, while we know roughly when a penultimate expectation would be realised, this doesn't mean that in fact it *will* be realised. I may, in fact, never retire; I may only have 6910 sleeps left in me. This is not the case with death and God; they will come, regardless. The second way our penultimate and ultimate expectations differ is that we don't know *when* to expect the ultimate ones. The effect of this is felt in what we do in relation to them while we wait. We know what to do as we prepare for baby or retirement; how does one prepare for death, or the coming of God?

As a general rule, we tend to prepare either anxiously for these things, or not at all. And, in both cases, the anxiety or the indifference looks pretty much the same. Anxiety in the face of death takes the form of a kind of continually looking over our shoulder: are we safe? Is everything in place? Anxiety in the face of death looks like Brexit and Donald Trump and the need to buy a new car just because it has an extra airbag. This is not often much different from the anxiety we feel in the face of the coming of God: have we done the right thing, got ourselves covered? Anxiety in the face of God is circumcision in St Paul's churches and the drive to financial sustainability in our own.

So it is perhaps not a surprise that we often imagine that God finally comes *with* death. It has sometimes been said that the church, when its early expectation of the imminent return of God in Christ within the lifetime of the first disciples was not met, shifted the coming of God – our meeting of God – to our personal deaths, thereby making it less cosmic an event but no less imminent. There may be some truth in this historical account for how the understanding developed, that we meet God in a special and defining way when we die. Yet linking our definitive meeting with God with our deaths has perhaps *always* been the secret logic of “religion”, linking or interpreting God’s freedom in relation to the unpredictability of our dying. Our preparation for God’s coming goes hand-in-hand with our preparation for our death, if we prepare for either.

Now, perhaps it might seem that we’ve wandered some way from our gospel reading this morning. There we hear of the master of a household who has gone away, and will return. The question is, Will his servants be found to be ready for him, or will they be asleep? Yet, the coming of the master could well be his servants’ death and the parable would still make pretty good sense, at least to our typical way of thinking about God and death.

The point of all this is to suggest that God and death are often “structurally” the same in the way that we think. They share the character of ultimate expectations, in that they are guaranteed to come, unlike our penultimate expectations. They share the character of being “unexpected” expectations, in that we know they are coming but we don’t usually know exactly when. And they are typically bound together, in that they tend to be imagined to be co-incident – to come at the same time: death is the occasion of God’s reckoning.

Now, more to move more intentionally to our text this morning – and the parable of the returning master of the household in particular: The point of this parable is not the same as the point of the threatened proverbial bus which might take you out if you as soon as you leave an evangelistic rally. If God is indicated by the master in the parable, then the point is *not* that God is absent and then returns, and that you’d better get ready. It is rather that God’s absence is the *particular way* in which God is present, until God comes “again”.

This is not intended to be a clever confusion of the issue, the statement of a paradox as a dismissal of what is a real question. It is rather what we might call a *baptism* of the text – a drawing of the text into the dynamic of life before God, in Christ. Jesus portrays the servants living their lives “as if” the master were present, such that whether the master is present or not makes no difference to how they act. This has the effect of indicating that there is really nothing to expect which will radically change things in the way that God’s arrival is usually expected to do; life in God’s apparent absence is lived as if God has *already* come.

And this has a startling effect with respect to our experience of death. If, in our minds, God and death coincide, then the already-having-come of God is the already-having-come of death. It is here that a baptism of this text becomes especially pressing, and we take our lead here from what we’ve heard from Paul in Galatians over the last few weeks. There Paul writes: *I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me. “I have been crucified... I died to the law”*. For Paul, death – the *weight* of death and its sting – is behind him, precisely because God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Death is *not* the moment of God’s reckoning with us or, at least, not *our* death is not that moment. Death is dealt with in the cross – Christ’s death – which is also God’s coming. And so God reckons with us at the point

of faith – as Paul said of Abraham’s faith: the cross is the object of faith, the point at which righteousness is accounted to us.

All this suggests another surprising thing: that my earlier question, How do we prepare for our ultimate expectations – death and God – is in fact a “*non-Christian*” question. Christians do not *prepare* for God’s coming, or for their deaths. We declare that these are already decisively determined. Rather than “prepare” for God and death, all that we do is as *testimony* to God’s having already definitively come, to death’s having already been definitively dealt with.

There might still be a kind of consummation of what is now seen as through a glass darkly. But this consummation is not a *threat* – “God is coming, death is coming” – which causes us to scurry around like ants whose anthill a little boy has jumped up and down on. It is, rather, a promise: it will only get better. And it is here that the structural similarity of God and death breaks down. The full weight of death is behind us: I have been crucified with Christ; the life I live is Christ alive in me. The full weight of death is behind us because God as *already* come. But the full weight of God’s presence is still ahead of us. And this is promise to look forward and not threat before which we might cower.

This is the gospel: life opening up a head of us, regardless of how much the life insurance companies might charge us to open up an account at this particular point in our lives. Life is always opening up for the baptised, and no longer narrows down to death.

We began by observing that our reading asks of us, What are you waiting for? If the answer to this question is the God of the gospel, then the question takes on a different feel: What *are* you waiting for? Death is behind you, only life ahead, so get on with it.

Now is the hour appointed by God,

now is the moment for living and loving,

now is the time when God comes to us and we can leave death behind us.

By the grace of this God – by the power of God’s Spirit – may we be raised to the occasion which is life in Christ, to the glory of God and unto our own fullest humanity. Amen.
