

Easter 5
14/5/2017

Mark the Evangelist

1 Peter 2:2-10
Psalm 31
John 14:1-14

A Text out of Context

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

I don't suppose too many people lie awake at night pondering the question why the Bible comes to us divided as it is into its various chapters and verses.

The fact is that when the books of the Bible were originally composed they did not contain the chapter or verse references which are familiar to us. That should not really be a surprise. After all, when we write letters we don't divide them into chapters or verses. No more would Paul have done when he dashed off his letters to various churches. And the gospel writers were composing a sequential drama – why would they destroy the essential flow of the narrative by inserting chapters and verses?

As far as the chapter divisions commonly used today are concerned, they were developed by an Archbishop of Canterbury around the year 1227, that is, only 800 years ago. Surprisingly, perhaps, the Hebrew Old Testament verses were compiled even later by a Jewish rabbi by the name of Nathan in 1448. The New Testament division into standard numbered verses arrived even more recently less than 500 years ago in 1555, virtually yesterday. It may well be the case that motivation for the verse divisions we have could be as pedestrian as indicating the amount of ink the quill of a monkish scribe could hold at a single dipping!

At any rate, beginning with the Geneva Bible, these divisions have been accepted in the main in all further translations.

Now if one concedes that these divisions allow us to find various texts quickly, the fact is that in more than a few places the divisions are poorly placed, and in some cases effectively destroy the intention of the writer.

Today is a case in point – John 14, a text commonly employed for funeral services, where it only belongs by real compromise. Sorry about that. Another purple passage is the so-called hymn to love of 1 Corinthians 13, equally compromised by its use in marriage services without the final verses of Chapter 12. Cherry picking texts like these without regard to the preceding verses destroys the intention whether of Epistle or Gospel.

So let me remove the chapter heading of John 14, and begin with the concluding verses of chapter 13:

“Simon Peter said to Jesus, “Lord where are you going?”

Jesus answered “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward. Peter said: “Why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you”. Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly I tell you, before the cock crows you will have denied me three times”. Only now can we properly start to read Chapter 14:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places... I go to prepare a place for you that where I am you may be also.”

The point is that in Chapter 13 where Jesus is going to prepare a place for us is the Cross and, lest we overlook the consequent inference, “that where I am you may be also”! It could not be clearer: “If any would come after me, let them take up their cross and follow me.”

This means that the gaining of the final “dwelling place” can only be secured, literally, by this bloody “resting place” on the way. Disregarding these concluding verses of Chapter 13, the assurance of Chapter 14 about “dwelling places” has been tamed virtually beyond any authentic recovery. Jesus’ promise of “*going to prepare a place for you*” is first of all the impotent resting place of the cross. It is not, to be brutal, a crossless cloud in the sky.

That is to say, before consoling ourselves with Chapter 14, we have to pan back from Chapter 13 to understand the larger context of the Fourth Gospel as a whole. Then it is that we discover that the whole book is about the revelation of the divine glory precisely in the salvation of the world, and that the way to understand this drama is to see it within the vast and sprawling story of Israel and the whole creation.

In other words, John is writing a new Genesis. In effect, the six stages of Creation of the first chapter of Genesis, concluding with the rest of the seventh day, can be likened to the stages of constructing a temple into which eventually the builder will come and take up his residence in the “rest” of the seventh day. So it is that Israel’s God will say in the Psalms about the temple: “*Here is Zion, my dwelling place*”, uniting the dwelling place of the creation with that of the holy people.

For this reason, as the Gospel of John unfolds the New Creation, it focuses the story again and again on the Temple; on Jesus’ upstaging of the Temple; on his implicit warning in his ministry of the untrustworthy Temple and its guardians; and on his final performance on the Cross of a new embodiment of Temple that the old temple could not achieve.

Only grasping something like this can we now understand John 14: “*In my Father’s house are many “dwelling” or “resting” places*. To such a temple place, Jesus is going by way of the Cross as pioneer in order that a true and final dwelling place for God and the creation can be built.

This foundational image of the Temple is brought home to us in the epistle reading today, as it builds on this image of the temple as both creation and the new creation, its corner stone requiring living stones forming a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, the people of God. Here, after the inauguration of the new Temple of the crucified Jesus, the Creation and New Creation become one in the call to be a chosen race, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order to proclaim the mighty acts of him “who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light”.

Just here the figure of the Crucified, as the light shining in the darkness, brings the “dwelling place” of the Cross and the “dwelling place” of the new creation together in the construction of the ultimate temple, a single heaven and earth reality. Only by way of the Cross does this one “temple/cosmos dwelling place” emerge, holding together God’s space and our space.

How far all this is from the ancient pagan world, and from our contemporary pagan world. It is in the ancient pagan world, not the ancient Jewish world, that we hear stories of an angry God and an innocent victim. In the same way, in our contemporary pagan world people hear what they think is the gospel, and instead of hearing that “*God so loved the world that he gave his only son*” they hear the pagan story that “God so hated the world that he killed his only son”. We have heard this fundamental disaster again just this week in the lamentable ignorance of such an otherwise clever man as Stephen Fry. Popular blasphemy will always get 7 million hits on YouTube. You want to know what Christian mission today is, given the shame of the long failure of the churches to make absolutely clear this decisive contrast? This mission is nothing more nor less than unrelentingly confronting this perennial paganism. To this end, John is writing a new Genesis, so that the death of Jesus becomes the new dwelling place of the renewed temple Image at the heart of a new heaven and earth. It is just here, in this costly “dwelling place”, that the world is invited to recognise and understand its creator as the God of unstoppable love.

This is why John 14 must be glued without any break to John 13. So when you get home, white out the heading “Chapter 14”.
