

Pentecost 5
9/7/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Zechariah 9:1-12a

Psalm 145

Matthew 11:1-6, 16-19, 25-30

Resting on the cross

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

These are surely words we all hear gladly – the promise of an easy yoke and a light burden: rest for our souls. And yet the yoke which Jesus carries, the burden he bears – the yoke and burden he offers us – is the cross. How is it that this is an easy (or better translates, “kind”, or “good”) yoke and a light burden?

Our passage began with Jesus characterising “this generation”. Here he means not merely the people to whom he was speaking at the time, but all who share in a similar outlook. That outlook, whichever local form it might take, has its substance in a rejection of the kingdom of God as he preached it.

Jesus cites as evidence for this the rejection of both John the Baptist and himself. “John came, neither eating nor drinking, and you said he had a demon; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you called him a glutton and a drunkard”. It is claimed by their critics that John and Jesus don’t “fit”, don’t connect in with what it “obviously” a more appropriate way to do and to be.

But Jesus’ own critique reveals that this is more than a matter of John and himself not simply fitting some particular sense for appropriate behaviour and outlook. John and Jesus represent polar opposites, but neither fit. It is not a matter of the conservatives finding comfort in John but rejecting Jesus, or the liberals rejecting John but finding a kindred spirit in Jesus. There is nothing in the judgement of either John or Jesus which shows us therefore how we *ought* to be, except perhaps the grey, murky and dull option of “moderation”.

The not-fitting of Jesus and John is more fundamental than their not toeing this or that party line.

Jesus clarifies thus: God has hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.

When we think about our children, the temptation to sentimentality is strong. We love them, they love us; it is not for nothing that the image of God as embracing us as children is so strong in our religious desires and traditions.

But it is not sentimentality to which Jesus appeals here. The characteristic of little children important here is their *inability to judge*. Children simply receive. An infant does not know whether she is learning the right or wrong way to be, whether her parents are good or bad, whether she is born into privilege or deprivation. She simply is. And receives. And gives.

If I go much further we'll end up in sentimentality again, because it is also important to grow and learn and mature and discern. What is "wrong" or incomplete about children can certainly be addressed in maturity; Jesus' point here, however, is that what is wrong or distorted in maturity *is* present in infancy.

Again: the characteristic of little children important here is their *inability to judge*.

The inability to judge in little children reflects a kind of absence of knowledge – not knowing what is good or what is evil, but simply acting and being acted upon. It is for this reason that, even when they are being naughty, little kids are so gloriously free of *guile*, free of calculating shrewdness.

Important for understanding what is going on here is the Genesis apple-munching episode: the desire of Adam and Eve to know what is good and what is evil. And what is the first thing which happens when this knowledge is received? Self-awareness and fear:

...the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked;

Adam then relates to God:

I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

What is going on here? God has already seen them – *us* – naked. This is doubtless an occasion of great mirth for God, but is also how we are created and is not a ground for judgement.

The knowledge of good and evil delivers the capacity to judge. But it becomes in our hands a loose cannon, firing wildly in all directions. Its first victims are Adam and Eve themselves. They judge themselves as incomplete in their nakedness, and they judge God: that God will also be offended by them in their nakedness. This kind of knowledge brings only judgement and the fear of judgement. It is a knowledge which divides, distances, crucifies.

This is the whole of our human predicament: our judgement of each other, our judgement of God. The whole of the gospel is the converse: judgement itself judged.

If you were to look at John the Baptist and Jesus you would find them irreconcilable: on the one hand, the mad-eyed fanatic beyond the city wall, eating grasshoppers and shouting prophecies; on the other hand, the gentle healing touch brought bear among the city's best and worst. Who could see the reign of God between these two extremes?

But this is precisely the *labour* and *heavy burden* from which Jesus offers us freedom in our reading today: the labour of having to see, to *know* – the labour of *anxious* knowledge and the burden of judgement which comes with it. The yoke and the burden which Jesus brings is a death to the hold these things have on us, an end to the ceaseless cycles of judgement and recrimination.

The sign, and the means, of this death is the *cross* of Jesus.

The cross is the *sign* because it reminds us that there is nowhere we can go where God's love does not follow. Our judgement of Jesus – to the point of naming him God-forsaken on the cross – is not *God's* judgement on him. The resurrection of Jesus is a vindication which points us back to the cross as a sign of the depth of God's commitment to us.

And the cross of Jesus is the *means* of our death to the cycles of judgement because God allows that Christ's cross also be *our* cross. Jesus' refusal to know, to judge, to divide, to distance – even to the point of being “known”, judged, divided and distanced himself – is offered to us.

To come to Jesus is to come to the cross.

Here rest is found because here our *propensity* for judgement and our *fear* of judgement are themselves judged and put to death.

Here God takes from the wise and the intelligent who imagine that they know and see, and gives to us who are reborn as children in God's own kingdom.

Such children know and see only that they belong to God, and God belongs to them.

In Jesus God offers us the light yoke and kind burden of having nothing to fear. In this is rest for our souls.

Thanks be to God.
