

Pentecost 13  
3/9/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 15:15-21  
Psalm 26  
Matthew 16:21-26

For Christ's sake

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“For what we are about to receive, Lord, make us truly thankful, for Christ's sake. Amen.”

What have we just prayed? This is surely a reasonable question, given that it is prayed often enough at the tables of the pious. Clearly, we prayed that we be found to be grateful for what is to be received. In this context, that's the sermon, which perhaps makes it a bold prayer for me to put on your lips at this point!?

But notice what we use to *lever* the prayer: “for Christ's sake.” What on earth (or, in heaven), does this little phrase mean? The easy answer we can find in a dictionary: “For Christ's sake: prepositional phrase, used to express surprise, contempt, outrage, disgust, [boredom], or frustration” (wikitionary.org). In response to this definition we might feel moved to remark, “For Christ's sake!”

But setting profanity or even blasphemy aside, what is going on in our table grace or in a text like the one we have heard today: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life *for my sake* will find it”?

Having dealt with the profane sense of “for Christ's sake”, we must turn to another more insidious sense which accords to what these words usually mean. When I say, “I did it for Jane's sake”, I mean that I acted *for her benefit*. My efforts accrue in some way to *Jane's* account – *she* is the beneficiary. Yet this is not the case in our gospel text. *Jesus has no interest in what we do*. If, in some way, we lose our life – literally or figuratively – Jesus does not benefit. Jesus does not *need* us to take up our cross and follow. We add nothing to him in our response to his call.

This was a something of a shock to me as I wrote it. How can it be so? It is the case because this is how it is with Jesus' own work. What Jesus does is not “for God's sake”, in the sense of *adding* to what God is. God does not need Jesus to do anything or, to put it differently, there is nothing which it is *necessary* that Jesus do it. This is a thought which will likely give rise to “surprise, contempt, outrage, disgust, or frustration”. Do we not imagine that God needs *us*, that God calls us to do certain things – maybe Hotham Mission things, maybe certain liturgical things maybe “Marriage Equality” things – all “for God's sake,” understanding that without those things God's project is diminished or thwarted? Even closer to our sense for the confessional heart of the matter, did not God have a “plan” for Jesus, in which it is “necessary” that he be crucified? Does not Jesus die for some “sake”?

Those who took offence at Jesus in the gospel story, of course, did not express their contempt, outrage, disgust and frustration with, “For Christ's sake!” Their offence and their actions against Jesus were summed up with “for *God's* sake” or “for *Rome's* sake,” but operating precisely with this sense of *for the benefit of*. “For God's sake” and “for Rome's sake” express contempt and outrage on *God's* behalf and *Rome's* behalf. Seen from within this understanding, Jesus is perceived to be doing nothing to help God or Rome. He is, then, perceived as having a negative impact in a world where the good is dependent on our attitudes and actions. The programs of God and Rome are understood

to be advanced when the troublemaker is dealt with, so that it is *necessary* that Jesus die, if God is to continue to be God and Rome to be Rome.

This sense of necessity is the essence of sin. Sin becomes possible because of a perceived *need*. Random, unnecessary sin is just capricious sociopathy; a *good* sinner as a *reason* to sin, and justifies his or her actions by reference to that reason, that necessity. We appeal to the notion of “rights” by telling ourselves that we *deserve* something we probably don’t, or we appeal to the notion of necessity by telling ourselves that we are not free to act otherwise. If indeed there were rights or necessities involved we would not be dealing with sin but simply observing *nature* following its course. The accomplished sinner knows this and appeals to nature as a justification of his or her sin.

The thing about Jesus is that he doesn’t do anything because it is *necessary*. It is not even “necessary” that Jesus die in order to save sinners, as our atonement theories sometimes have it. Rome and religion find it necessary to kill him, but Jesus simply *lives*, even on the cross, until nature does finally take its course.

To lose one’s life for Christ’s sake is not to *add* to him but to take up a share in his strange freedom. It is a *strange* freedom because it is both the freedom for which we are created and yet a freedom from which we are alienated. Most of the weight which crushes us – perhaps *all* of that weight? – is necessity of our own making, rods for our own backs, or for the backs of others.

The freedom which Jesus lived revealed these things as secondary, as *idolatrous*. But this revelation brings a conflict, the result and sign of which is the cross. The cross, then, is not merely a righteous or undeserved suffering; it is the mark of a free life – a life free from false necessities, from fear of things which *look* like gods but are not and, so, are unnecessary. The cross marks a particular kind of suffering – the suffering which comes from the clash of the freedom for which we were created with the unfreedoms we create. Think back to our reading last week: Peter, set free to bind and loose both earth and heaven, immediately tying *himself* in knots. It is just this which brings Jesus to talk of his cross, and of ours.

We won’t labour this much more now, but the call to the cross is *central* to Christian discipleship and spoken in many ways in the gospels. To finish up, let’s hear one of the more colourful – although no less terrifying – accounts of the call, given a little earlier in Matthew’s gospel, in that account of the crucified life we call the Sermon on the Mount:

<sup>6.25</sup> ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup>Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup>And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>28</sup>And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup>yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup>But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? <sup>31</sup>Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” <sup>32</sup>For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup>But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Or, as we've heard today,

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?”

A life lived – a life “lost” – for Christ's sake, is a life in which the only thing which is “necessary” is that we rest in God's knowledge of what we need.

“For what we are about to receive, Lord, may we be truly thankful” is a prayer which looks forward into life acknowledging that not even we are necessary. All that we are is gift. This is the meaning of a life lived as a prayer “for Christ's sake”.

Let us then – with Christ, in Christ, for Christ's sake – strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and watch for God's addition of all other things.

Amen.

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