

Pentecost 17
1/10/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Psalm 25
Matthew 21:23-32

Loved inside out

In our gospel reading today the elders and the chief priests ask a question which seems reasonable enough: by what authority do you do these things – “these things” including the overthrowing of the temple marketplace? We understand that particular answers might be dangerous for Jesus but, still, we listen for a straightforward answer from him. What we hear, however, is a clever answer which seems simply to allow Jesus to avoid the hard question. Yet the point of the story is not that we might remark, “Clever Jesus.” The text lays before us a challenge about the relationship between how we think the world is or *ought* to be and how we *actually* live in that world.

Jesus counters with a question of his own, about the authority of the now dead John the Baptist. The elders and chief priests carefully weigh up their answer-options: if we say John’s ministry was from God, we’ll be shown up as in error, for we did not welcome him as a prophet; but if we say John’s ministry was of human origin, we risk the anger of the people. Finding both of these outcomes equally unpalatable, they are forced into a public and dishonest agnosticism: “...we do not know...”

The *public* nature of their refusal to know is critical. They know very well what they think privately, for we see it in their earlier rejection of John. But they dare not think this out loud. For *fear* they refuse to declare the truth as they see it. In this dishonest turn the elders sever the relationship between their “internal” and “external” selves: what I am in myself and what I am in public are here demonstrated to be two different things. My private self is created by my own thoughts, experiences, emotions, desires, etc., and those of the people close to me. My public self is what I think I need to be in order to *protect* my private self. The elders and the chief priests protect themselves in their private beliefs by refusing to have a public opinion about John.

Things are very different when it comes to Jesus himself. God reigns in a certain way “inside” Jesus and in the *same* way “outside” him: internal motivation and external action are the same. In Jesus, God’s kingdom is come and will is done, “on earth, in heaven”. Jesus *is* what we see him to be; he has what we might call a “plain sense”, nothing hidden.

This is not how it is for the rest of us. Whereas the duplicitous religious leaders could think one thing and say or do another, Jesus could not because *God* does not. There is no distinction between how this God is in himself, and how God is and acts among us; there is a cohesion between God’s private life and God’s public life.

And this brings us to a surprising connection: this exchange between Jesus and the elders hinges on what the church has sought to mark with its classic confession of God as Trinity. This is *surprising*, first, because neither Jesus nor the elders have any notion of the church’s later trinitarian confession. It is surprising, second, because few Christians actually believe that trinitarian doctrine is about anything that *matters*, believe that it is more than some strange thing we are made to say and believe.

What *is* the church's confession of God as Trinity? It is *not*, in the first instance, that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the form or "shape" of the confession. More fundamentally, the confession of the Trinity is concerned to affirm that the "inside" and the "outside" of God are "the same". The doctrine says that God is-in-Godself in the same way that God is-in-the-world. There is no deception, duplicity, or dissembling. With God it is not "What you see is what you get"; this is the game of the elders and the chief priests, and ours with them. With God, it is "What you see is what there *is*". So far as what we see can be *labelled*, those labels happen to be "Father", "Son" and "Holy Spirit", but this is just so that we can say *something* about these identities as they converge in Jesus. The matter of central importance is that the way in which Father, Son and Spirit "play" before us in the person of Jesus is how they play when they're *not* in front of us. How God is in the world *is* how God is in Godself.

The importance of this here is the *contrast* between this divine way of being and that of the chief priests and the elders – and of us with them. They, and we, are different in ourselves from what we are in public. I don't refer here to those things which are properly personal and not appropriate to public space. I mean rather those circumstances when we find ourselves doing the kinds of calculations the chief priests and the elders do in response to Jesus: knowing what we think but sparing ourselves the grief which would come from speaking it, *choosing* to divide ourselves into two identities – the one I think I *know* and the one I dare to *show*. God gives us each *one* face, and we *divide* it into two, each side looking in different directions, each ear listening for different things.

The counter-question of Jesus demonstrates that, in their dissembling, their deception, the authority of the chief priests and elders to ask their question evaporates. They know two authorities, Jesus knows only one. Authority rises from a single voice, from both ears hearing the same thing. It is on the divine cohesion of his own inner life and outer ministry that Jesus' authority is founded. In contrast, the priests and the elders – and we with them – are *divided* in themselves; they are spiritually "schizophrenic" (Greek: "divided mind").

Such dishonesty about myself before others arises from fear: I don't trust the world with my true self. Fair enough: the world is a dangerous place and a self-preserving instinct does not always deny God. But at the same time dishonesty like this also *gives rise* to fear, because no one really knows what's lurking beneath the surface. Fear breeds dishonesty and dishonesty dissolves community.

In contrast, honesty – being the same in myself as I am in public – gives rise to love and trust. It is not easy, and often dangerous. I have to put myself at risk by revealing who I am so that you can know what to expect from me when the relationship between public and private is pressed. And when you know what to expect, your world is safer. Love – community and a safe public space – grows from honesty, and enables honesty.

The gospel is that Jesus – and the God working in him – is not different in himself from what he is in relation to those around him. He names fearful dishonesty and calls it to account. He loves with a creative honesty otherwise unknown to us.

The gospel is *further* that, while *we* will fail at being Jesus – of which the cross is the sign – *God* remains inside as God is outside: ever *for* us. God is faithful to Godself and to the creation which was, and will again become, "very good". The body of God – the convergence of Father and Son and Spirit in the person of Jesus – the body of God broken *by* us is still God's body *for* us. And so we take and eat and drink, and declare in these actions that what we have seen in God's work in Jesus is how God is in Godself:

love on the outside, love on the inside. This love we take to *our* insides that our outside might begin also to become love.

So fed, we are made to become, however fleetingly, *ourselves* the body of Christ: a community in which the public is built up by the private, and the private is built up by the public, a community not of fear but of faith and hope, in love.

This is the gift of the gospel, and its call to us.

All thanks and praise be to the one who loves us inside out, calling us to this love and making it possible among us.

To God's greater glory, and to the richer humanity of all God's people, let us, then, look to be made love, inside and out.

Amen.
