

Pentecost 24
19/11/2017

Mark the Evangelist

1 Corinthians 3:18-22
Psalm 90
Matthew 25:14-30

The absently present God

“Do your best with what you’ve been given, in the time you’ve been given!” Is this not the moral point of our reading this morning? Perhaps, and there’s nothing wrong with that lesson, although we might say two things about it.

First, it’s boring. Or, at least, it would be boring to hear any expansion on such a moral point from the pulpit. There are plenty of others to tell us to do the best we can with what we have been given. This is why we have parents, teachers, coaches, shock jocks and the members of Her Majesty’s loyal opposition. These all say with one voice: don’t waste the opportunity life has given you. Let’s hear that lesson, and recognise also that we have an opportunity today to hear something different.

And, *second*: on top of being boring, the moral reading of the parable is *tedious*, in that any moral precept encourages us to self-righteousness, and the self-righteous are always tedious. I’m reminded of a tussle – necessarily, a *gentle* tussle – I once had with a widow about the Bible texts to be read at her husband’s funeral. Today’s text was the one she wanted because she felt her husband had lived his life as the first two slaves in the story. Thus, the Scripture reading was to be an extension of the eulogy. The problem here is that, again, the reading is then only telling us what we already know, so why bother reading it?

Acknowledging, then, the importance of doing well with what we have been given, let’s put the moral reading to one side. What is said in word or action in the church should never be boring or tedious, despite all evidence and tendencies to the contrary.

Instead, let’s consider the parable as a statement about the presence and absence of God, which is surely an *interesting* question in a world where mocking atheism struggles with zealous faith.

We begin with a passing remark about the word “talent” in the parable. What is *doesn’t* mean is what we usually mean by “talent” – as in “we have a talented organist” or “he spent the afternoon at the beach checking out the talent”. The Greek here is “a thing measured out” – say, gold or silver. In the parable the “talent” is certainly money, although as a symbolic text it could mean for us any blessing or responsibility which we might imagine has been given us.

Let’s look, then, to the experience of the first two slaves. When their master is *present*, they are given some duty or grace, 2 portions to one, 5 to the other. This much is straightforward. The story begins to get interesting when we hear that, in the *absence* of the master, they receive exactly the same – 2 for the slave with 2 and 5 for the slave with 5. This is to say that, in his absence, *it is as if the master were not gone*. For the lives of these two slaves, the absence of the master is like the master’s presence: accruing *the very same* responsibility or blessing. And, surely, we can also say this the other way around: the master’s *presence* is like the master’s *absence*, for if they are the same why should we privilege the one over the other?

When we then allow ourselves to read the parable allegorically and become more theologically explicit, so that the master “stands for” God, we might dare to imagine this: for the first two slaves there is no difference between *God’s* presence and God’s absence: God’s absence is like God’s presence and God’s presence is like God’s absence. Because the master in the parable takes his leave, and then returns to see what has happened in his absence, it’s typical to read this story as a lesson in the importance of living our lives “as if God were there” even when – like the master – God apparently is not. But the experience of the slaves in the story suggests another, equally valid reading: if God’s absence is like God’s presence and God’s presence is like God’s absence, then we are called as much to live as if God were *not* there as we are called to live as if God *were*. Or, to pull out the unexpected bit to stand by itself: we are called to live as if God were not there.

What on earth could this possibly mean? At the very least it signifies that what we mean by the ‘presence’ or the ‘absence’ of God is less clear to us than we imagine. If that’s all we take away from this morning, important work will have been done.

But we can tease this out a bit further. I remarked earlier that, in a world of mocking atheism and over-zealous belief, the question of the presence and absence of God is an important one. Or so we usually imagine. But what happens in this dispute if suddenly atheism (the purported *absence* of God) and belief (the purported *presence* of God) begin to look very much *alike*. What could we be arguing about if the absence and the presence of God are not diametrically opposite?

What we are doing here is shifting what ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ signify when used with respect to God. Beliefs and atheisms – and the corresponding presences and absences of God – are like cholesterol: there’s the good kind and the bad kind. The good kind of belief and atheism is what we see in the first two slaves, in which the question of the presence or absence of God (or their master) is no distraction from who they are and what they are to do. Whatever the presence or absence of their master is to them, it is something other than being able to see and touch him, or not.

The bad kind of belief, with its corresponding atheism, is what we see in the third slave, who slips into and out of and back into belief as his master comes and goes and comes.

Most of us are the third slave: believing, not believing, sometimes as much on account of how long we’ve been sitting in traffic as on account of some deeper reflection or experience. That is, God tends to be as present or absent as the talent of hours we’ve slept, or the talent of food in our cupboards or the talent of grief it has been given us to bear.

This is simply how it is: this is what we are like – believers and non-believers. The question becomes, then, just how seriously we take this condition. Just like the question of God’s purported presence or absence, we can take our condition with deadly seriousness, or with light interest.

Deadly seriousness here involves recognising that the life of the third slave is buffeted by secondary things – the constantly shifting signs that God might or might not be present – with a constant shifting in behaviour or expectation in response. The deadliness here relates to what we do in response to this condition. Recognising our condition ought to *bring us* to a place like this one, now, on a regular basis. (Weekly, for example!)

Light interest in our condition, however, is what we should *take with us* when we leave. For we gather in this way each week to hear and to see in what way our lives are like the third slave in the story, and *to be shown what God will do to and for us* – all of which is good, regardless of our condition.

Not surprisingly, what we should see and hear in Word and Sacrament is quite like the strange overlap of the absence and presence of God in the parable: *our* very humanity in Jesus, yet not ours but *more* human (if that were possible); a *God* on a *cross*; a *future* in the *past* of the resurrection; a *life* though *death* in baptism; a *broken* body giving rise to a *whole* one in the Eucharist. A God absently present.

This is the life of the first two slaves, which is the life to which we are called. Such a life takes its bearings not from our fleeting questions but from God's demonstrated presence where he ought not to have been – in the cross – and demonstrated absence from where he was purported to have been – in the grip of the self-righteous who imagine that they know just where God is and have aligned themselves accordingly.

Our psalmist this morning put it thus: God is not an object in our world; God is our dwelling place, God as God is, and not as we imagine he ought to be.

The *effect* of this we have heard from Paul this morning (1 Corinthians 3.18-22), as he challenged the Corinthians in their confidence that they knew where to find God. The wrong kind of confidence divides the world up into places where God is and is not, into believers and non-believers. But if, Paul insists, God confuses wisdom and foolishness, and strength and weakness, by bring salvation through a crucified human being, then *everything* is God's, and everything is *ours*.

For all things are yours, whether ... the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

Nothing can separate us from the loving presence of this God.

This is the gospel, given to become our lives, that we might live in the very joy of God.
