

Lent 1  
18/2/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 9:8-17  
Psalm 25  
Mark 1:9-15

### Living with a forgetful God

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Noah-and-the-ark is perhaps the best known of all Bible stories, not least because it involves animals, and animals make great toys, and so nearly every kid gets to play Noah-and-the-ark at some stage or other. But what we all know about the story is typically the form and not the substance. The form of the story is Noah and the animals and the rainbow. The substance is, How to keep God under control or, perhaps better, Living with a forgetful God.

Of course, notions of keeping God under control, or God's forgetting of his promises, are impious. But, as it happens, that such thoughts are necessary comes from God himself. We know well enough the flow of the Noah story. There is sinfulness across the face of the earth, except for Noah and his family; God resolves to wash away all humankind but them; the flood comes and goes; God resolves not to do this again and gives the rainbow as a sign of this resolution. It is the rainbow stage of the story which matters for God-control purposes.

As a sign, the rainbow is not a *mere* sign, in that it could have been something else. A rainbow bends in the way an archer's bow bends; more than a sign, it is a *symbol*, in that it resembles and so *reminds of* an archer's bow. The rainbow signs that God has laid down his weapon and will not attack again: "I have put my bow in the sky."

But notice *to whom* the sign-symbol is given. Specifically, it is not given to *us* that we be reminded; it is given *to God*, in order that *God* not forget the promise, Never Again. The rainbow declares that the people stand only when God remembers the covenant; only God can control God. The point at which heaven and earth meet is marked with something of such scale that God cannot miss it, and in such a way that *we* know God cannot miss it.

This pre-historical story with its ancient mythological symbolism seems a long way from the much less mythical gospel narratives of the ministry of Jesus. Yet it is not so far as we might first think. For Jesus is himself the point at which heaven and earth meet; Jesus is himself the New Testament's rainbow.

But at the same time Jesus' ministry culminates in the cross, a crisis of divine forgetfulness: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, forgotten me? (Mark 15.34). It is all the more poignant that Jesus should cry out so with the baptismal declaration still ringing in his ears: You are my Son, the Beloved. The cry from the cross is precisely a challenge to God that a covenant *has* been forgotten, despite the faithfulness of Jesus. Such a death for Jesus ought to be impossible, for how can God forget the Beloved? Yet the chaotic flood of human politics, religion and morality washes him away. This was not "the plan" as if it were *supposed to* happen; nothing is supposed to happen except that God remembers.

Has God forgotten, forsaken here? Yes, and No, as it always is between us and God. Yes, for what else could the cross be but God turning away? No, for what else is a resurrection but God remembering a beloved? The cross and the resurrection, the forgetting and the remembering, have to be held together in this way.

But it is a tight tangle of thought threads here, almost nonsensical. The language of forgetfulness and remembering makes no sense if we begin with the conviction that God knows everything and so cannot forget. But the Scriptures reduce neither God nor us to such simple notions. Simple ideas cannot reflect the experience of what passes between God and the world, between life and death, between remembrance and forgetfulness. These are never poles between which applies a strict logic; God-and-the-world requires its own way of thinking, part of which is a tangle of remembering-and-forgetting.

Jesus is baptised into our world, into the realm in which it is imagined – and so experienced – that God has forgotten. And so his being in the world is, specifically, as one of being forgotten and being remembered by God. The very baptism of Jesus at the outset of his ministry involves the recognition of Jesus by God – the *re*-cognition, the re-thinking, re-calling of him: *You are my Son, the Beloved*. God re-cognises, remembers, Jesus as the Beloved, and this is the basis of Jesus' own life and joy: the joy of finding himself thought again by God.

And us? God recognises us as beloved in another sign, given for divine and human remembrance. The sacrament of broken bread and blest cup is a drama of remembered forgottenness: a broken body, healed.

Do this for the remembrance of me.

The remembrance here is no mere “thinking about old stuff”; it is a more potently a *making real and present here and now* what Jesus is. What is Jesus? The forgotten, forsaken world, *remembered*. And, when remembered, healed, because healing is what happens when *God* remembers.

The rainbow is an enormous sign at the point where heaven and earth meet. God cannot not but see it and be reminded of how he has promised the two shall be related.

The enormity of the sign which is Jesus himself is not spatial but relational: *My Son, the Beloved*. This God *cannot* forget, and it is God's remembrance of Jesus which is the sign given to us. We break bread and bless a cup, we eat and drink, that God's remembering of the forsaken Jesus might again be among us, that we-in-him might know the joy of being remembered.

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