

Lent 3
4/3/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
John 2:13-22

As good as it gets

Last week I spoke about How not to Fall on Your Face before God or, at least, how to minimise the pain of the gift of being in the presence of God.

A first falling on your face before God is unavoidable. This is the *form* of meeting with God and knowing that it *is* God we meet. Such a falling marks the gift of God – that God wills to meet us with grace and blessing.

But, in the stories of Abraham and Peter, we saw a second kind of falling before God which marked not God's gift but human presumption. Given that falling on your face is a painful experience – even when in holy awe – the best way not to fall on your face in this second way is not to get up again after the first fall.

Yet it remains the case that we *do* get up again. And again. And again, even if each time it – and the subsequent fall – is in quite different ways.

Our readings today relate to two of the gifts of God – the gift of the law and the gift of the Temple – two occasions for an appropriate falling before God. These are marks of God's covenant with Israel, pointers to God's presence to Israel, and to how Israel is to be present to God. Each is, unequivocally, a blessing, conveying the Who and the How and the Where of God's relationship with Israel. The life of the people of God is filled with such markers – commandments and ethics, temples and liturgies, creeds and confessions.

But, having been bowled over by the gift of God, the people of God then climb to their feet. This is what we do. Commandments become separated from the one who commands them. (We might think of all those lists of the Commandments in churches which omit the crucial opening lines telling who it is who gives the commandments, and what he has done). And the life of a Temple becomes separated from the One to be met within it; we don't need gospel readings to tell us that this happens. This is the cause of the wrong kind of falling on our face: separating the gift from the giver.

There is nothing wrong with Temples and creeds and liturgies and codes of conduct. In fact, all human existence is filled with them in one form or another, so it ought to be no surprise that God uses such things to deal with us, or provides them that we might deal with God. In fact we are right to be suspicious of talk about God which denies that God uses – even needs – words and community and buildings in this way.

This is to say that the Temple and the Commandments matter more than we are likely to imagine, for they are *sacramental*. Sacraments are things which look like one thing but are in fact something else. What is important in this is that the 'something else' is not *inherent* in the sacrament; it comes from God. God gives the sacrament and it only 'works' when it remains God's. God uses the mundane – a bath for baptism, a meal for thanksgiving, a temple, an ethical code – to get to us, and that we might get to God.

The basis for our saying this is in what Jesus throws to us religious in the Temple story this morning: ‘Tear down this temple, and I will build it up again in three days’. Christians, of course, know what this means because the text tells us: Jesus casts himself as the temple, and there’s a hint here at his coming passion and resurrection.

But this is not enough. There is more here than the shift of the presence of God from the stones of the temple to the flesh of Jesus. ‘Tear this temple down, and I will build *it* up again’. The temple to be built up is the same temple which was torn down. The Jesus who is resurrected is the Jesus who is crucified, who stands before the temple authorities and the freshly minted disciples in all his ordinariness. This is tantamount to saying, ‘*This* is what the rebuilt temple will look like: *it doesn’t get any better than this*’.

And *that* is why Jesus is crucified: because we *want* it to be better than *this*. ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’, comes the challenge to Jesus after he has taken the whip to the temple marketplace, and he responds, ‘Tear it down and I’ll build it up’. But the sign is not the dazzling miracle of a resurrection – a neat enough trick in itself. The sign is that *the risen one is the very one who stands before them in the Temple courtyard*. Knock me down, and *I* will get up again. God looks like this ordinary Jesus. Or like a Temple. Or like Commandments on stone tablets.

The *extraordinary* character of the work of God in Jesus is in the *ordinariness* of Jesus: *this* body, *this* flesh, *this hungry stomach*, *these dirty feet*, *this* bloody nakedness on a cross. All *these* things God can make a temple. To declare as we do at Christmas, that the Word became flesh, is not to say merely that it became *meat*. This flesh was not only body and blood but was all that *become* body and blood, and all that body and blood *become*. The Word became all that we need in order to be ourselves, and all that we create.

I am, Jesus says, what the Temple and the Commandments and the prayers and the sacrifices and the festivals – or even you – can be when God is active in them, and in you.

To fall on our face for the wrong reason is to have separated the gift from the giver, and usually precisely because we think that this is required for God’s own sake. Think again of Abraham’s derisive laughter and Peter’s rebuke of Jesus, and their proposals of how God might do things better. And so in the end a crucifixion seems necessary for God’s own sake, for here we assert that Jesus could not possibly be the sanctuary of God.

The gospel, however, is that God will not be separated from the gift, and comes and comes and comes again to reclaim our flesh as his own. This is the resurrection of Jesus. Here God declares not only who Jesus was, but that *how* Jesus – his ordinariness – is part of his identity as the divine Son. In this sense, the resurrection must be of a recognisable ‘body’ with a history, and not merely a ghostly apparition.

Having reclaimed the gift of fleshliness as his own, God then gives the gift again. And this is *our* resurrection. We are raised into the ordinariness of our lives: our work, our relationships, our temples and codes. These are the places where God will meet us because they are where we are.

You have torn it down, God says, but I will raise it up again and give it back to you. And *then* you will know me, and be amazed.
