

Easter 3  
15/4/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 1:5-2:2  
Psalm 4  
Luke 24:36b-48

### Not afraid of the dark

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It is an assumption at the heart of contemporary Western religious (and non-religious) thought that God is *simple*. This means that God is one, undivided, without paradox or complexity in Godself. Not all religious thought holds to the simplicity of God as a basic principle (think, for example, of the complexity of the Greek mythological world) but it is fundamental for people like us in places like this, and it has ancient roots.

(To say that God is simple is not to say that *speaking about* God is always thought to be simple, but the difficulty of speaking of God is usually attributed to our poor articulation or the built-in poverty of human language rather than to how and how God actually is).

An instance of the idea of the simplicity of God appears in our reading from 1 John today: 'God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.' This is not much different from, 'God is one, and in God there is no division' or 'God is pure, without blemish.' Christians need have no particular problem with such ways of talking about God, although this will depend on the *consequences* drawn from a particular statement of God's simplicity.

Such consequences are just the issue with which John wrestles in our text today. Any statement about God which is worth making will have consequences *for us*. More specifically, anything we say about God will imply certain things to be said about *us*: *theology implies anthropology*.

Reading between the lines in our passage this morning, the general affirmation that 'God is light' has been extended by some in that community to imply that there is light without darkness in those who believe in, or reside within, or walk with such a God. The simplicity of God is extended to a simplicity in God's people: God is whole, undivided, pure and light – and so are we, the people who know this about God.

To this John has to say, No: 'if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (1.8). But crucial here is *why* John says this. The reason is not, to get just a little anachronistic, paedophile priests. John is not looking around at the church and seeing that it is still caught in the grip of sin. It *is* undeniable that sin continues in those who confess that God is light, but the good news about Jesus – that through him sin is forgiven (1.9, 2.2) – is not an answer to *our* sense for the sin which is in and about us. If it were, the sinfulness of humankind would be the first word of the church. Indeed, the church sometimes begins here but without benefit for anyone, because God is then constructed out of our darkness.

But John doesn't contrast an *idea* that God is light with an *idea* of human sinfulness, one abstract thought to counter another. Rather, his awareness of human sin *comes from* the God who is light: 'if we say that we have not sinned, we make *him* a liar and his word is not in us.' (It's not quite clear whether the 'him' here refers to God or to Christ but the distinction does not matter much for John's argument). God has said something, and the question is whether what has been said is true or not.

What, then, does God 'say'?

God 'says': *Jesus, in the flesh.*

For John, the nature of God as light and the sinful character of human existence are not contradictory ideas to be balanced with each other but are, rather, to be found together in the person of Jesus. It becomes clearer further into the letter that the problem of how to understand human sin is caught up with the question of who Jesus is and how he was. In particular, the question of the humanity – the *fleshliness* – of Jesus seems to have been the basis of split in the community: those who denied that Jesus was the full, fleshy incarnation of God and died a fleshy death on the cross left John and his community. (We will likely consider that more closely as we move further into the letter).

But John insists that the cross cannot be set aside; whatever the brilliance of the light which God is, there is a bloody mess in its midst. If God is light, then the *crisis of the cross* is light, is part of a Christian experience and understanding of God. When *John* says 'God is light' he means that the 'crossed' God is light – the God and Father of, and with, Jesus the crucified.

And if the cross is a part of what we have to say about God, then it is part of what we say about ourselves before God. Which is why the centre of all Christian conviction is not human sin left behind, but *forgiveness* – the point at which light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it, though the darkness continues (John 1.5). 'We have an advocate with the Father,' John says, 'Jesus Christ the righteous.'

Life in this God is a confessional life – a life which confesses how God is (this is our Creed) – and then confesses whatever shadows in us God's light shows to require the confession of contrition. If Jesus Christ the righteous could be crucified by those who saw the cross as God's righteous judgement on him, then the power of sin in human life is more than can be imagined.

John is in no doubt – and neither should we be – that if anyone is in Christ then she or he *ought* no longer to sin. But the 'ought' is contravened not only by moral weakness in us; this is too simple. The 'ought' awaits also the final consummation of all things, when God's light does not transport us on a rainbow out of the world but makes us-in-the-world new.

Our part is simply *to be* made new, and new, and new, as often as it is necessary, and so to become a pointer to the promise that God will restore all things. We are then, not afraid of the dark – the dark in us or around us – because God overcomes it, and will overcome it.

As John says, 'We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world'. On him we ever rest, as we get on with the business of living.

Let us, then, rest in him, and get on with it.

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