

Easter 6
6/5/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 1:5-9
Psalm 98
John 15:9-17

The blood of Jesus and the joy of God

Prelude: Reading a biblical text

It might be helpful to begin this morning by saying something about the way in which we are engaging with the first letter of John. We are not doing it taking a blow by blow, verse by verse account of what John says and why that might matter to us. This is because a lot of what John says quite simply does not make immediate sense. He often seems to go in circles, makes logical leaps which are not obvious to us, seems even to contradict himself on quite important things. A ‘straight reading’ – a ‘literal’ reading, if you like – can simply lead to confusion or uninformed rejection of what John has to say. This problem with the letter springs in part from the fact that it is a letter (or similar) – that it addresses a known community and known circumstances which we don’t know and in cultural and linguistic ways quite different from our own. We have to infer from what John says why he says it – a process a little like trying to lift yourself off the ground by pulling on your own bootstraps: never straightforward.

But there is another challenge, more important than the historical one. This is the gospel itself. John is not just a cultural or historical ‘other’ to us; his words come to us as ‘scripture’ – as ‘the word of God.’ We listen, then, for where John contravenes what we might have *in common* with those to whom he wrote: where does he say it ‘wrong’? These are the most interesting, engaging points. Where we find ourselves in agreement with the text (if we can be sure that we are), we simply affirm something we already know. But it’s the apparent cracks in the logic of the Scriptures which let in new light.

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One such crack appears in our reading from 1 John today, which we’ve heard now for the third time (there’s a lot going on here!):

‘...if we walk in the light as he himself walks in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus washes us from all sin.’

‘If we walk in the light... we have fellowship with one another.’ This is the reverse of how we typically understand fellowship or communion to work. For us – as a political theory, and in our common experience – it is communion which brings light. Dialogue brings understanding and illumination. Get the warring parties around the table, have them share of themselves, encourage understanding and empathy, and peace will follow: fellowship, communion. This is peace conceived in terms of strategy. And we know that it works. Seeking to live in communion can bring light.

But John says it the other way around: light brings communion – if we walk in the light, we have communion with one another. This is not accidental, a passing slip; the logic pops up right through the letter (see, e.g. 1.2; 2.11; the ‘externalising’ of love in the work of God, rather than our own work [3.6, 4.10]).

Communion is possible because of the light. This is not to diminish the importance of whatever light might spring from what relationships we might dare to enter into. We are only ourselves by virtue of our relationships to others; we can expect to grow and be illuminated by those relationships we already enjoy.

But John's vision is larger than what we know and are comfortable with. This is implicit in what he adds to his remarks about communion and walking in the light:

'...if we walk in the light as he himself walks in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus washes us from all sin.'

There are two things we note here. The first is the reference to the blood which washes sin away. Here the strangeness of sacrificial logic is invoked, upon which we touched a couple of weeks ago. But we notice this logic first of all to bracket it to one side. Sacrifice is one way of *interpreting* the cross and not a final explanation for what God does with the cross.

Nevertheless John is saying – and we can't simply bracket *this* out – that the cross of Jesus is the light which brings fellowship. The cross overcomes un-fellowship, un-communion – the darkness of sin.

And yet, behind this and at the same time, the cross is precisely the opposite. A crucifixion is a radical excommunication, a rupturing of communion with the executed criminal. So the cross both the sign of un-communion and makes communion possible.

This apparent contradiction is only resolved by the identity of the one on the cross – that Jesus is the Son of the Father who sent him. At the beginning of John's *gospel* we hear, 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him' (John 1.11). If Jesus is the Word, the Son of the Father, then in the crucifixion of Jesus is the relationship of all relationships broken: that of God to God's people and so of God to God's world.

This, of course, would be catastrophic on any account except that of the gospel. For the gospel may be put this way: the people of God do not cease to be the people of God for having crucified the Son of God. We do not define our relationship to God; God defines that relationship. That definition is that we are God's people; this is the 'essence' or substance of this relationship.

But, while we do not determine the *substance* of this relationship, but we do give the relationship its *form*, its shape. That form is most fundamentally the form of a cross. The *substance* of our relationship with God – that we belong to God, regardless – takes the form of the cross. And so the love which is the substance of the relationship is now not 'mere' love – formless affection or attraction – but a love which has *overcome*, a love which is *forgiveness*, a love with a history.

The cross saves because it is the shape *we* have given to our relationship with God, which God has honoured without changing the essence of God's own intentions with us: to be our God.

Here we come close to the meaning of another text we'll meet later in John's letter: we love because God first loved us (4.19). The 'first' here is not so much a chronological priority, that God 'got in' first, and our love follows. It more a matter of God 'out-loving' us. We give the God-relationship the shape of the cross, and God reveals in response just how seriously he takes us: the cross as a sign of excommunication is made the sign of God's communing love for the world (John 3.16f).

We noted in our first reflection on this letter another ‘crack’ in his logic which let in gospel light: the surprising rationale John gave for writing the letter: ‘We are writing these things so that *our* joy may be complete.’ John desires the joy of fellowship. But this unexpected thing – that he evangelises as much for himself as for those he addresses – is also not accidental. It has its basis in the gospel itself. For the gospel is that God insists on being the God of these people, even if that relationship takes the shape of a cross. For *we* are God’s joy, and God refuses to have his own joy denied. The crucified Jesus becomes the love and light of the world, in order that God’s own joy may be complete.

This is to say that, with this God, nothing is insurmountable.

It is also to say that, for a people so loved, nothing is insurmountable. If we walk in *this* light, then communion comes because nothing can finally keep us from each other; the blood of Jesus washes un-communion away from us (1.7).

Let us then, walk in the light by which God’s own joy is complete, that ours – and everyone’s – might yet be.
