

Pentecost 2
3/6/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 2:11-17
Psalm 81
John 2:23-3:6

Do not love as the world loves

In a sentence:

Love not as the world loved – to divide – but as God loves: to reconcile

‘Do not love the world or the things of the world.’

One of the principal criticisms of Christian ethics is a perceived nay-saying to the world and all that the critic considers good in it. Without doubt there is good reason for the criticism, in that Christians have not always smiled enough. Does John’s ‘Do not love the things of the world’ lead us astray here? It does not, but for this to be clear we see how we live in *multiple* worlds, not all of which are life-giving.

‘The world’ has a range of meanings in the Bible. It can mean, of course, simply ‘everything’ apart from God: ‘the heavens and the earth’ (Genesis 1.1). We strike a more nuanced sense when John’s gospel affirms that God loves ‘the world’ (John 3.16f), or 1 John affirms that Jesus is salvation for the whole world (2.2). Here the world is ‘humankind in its need,’ although it doesn’t leave the broader sense (‘everything’) behind.

And when today’s text says, ‘Do not love the world,’ we are dealing with yet another distinction: ‘world’ as the sphere of human intercourse and exchange, specifically in opposition to the will of God.

When John says ‘do not love the world or the things of the world’ and declares that ‘the world and its desire is passing away’, we have to draw on these shifts of meaning of ‘world’, *and* on the links between those meanings. The Scriptures ever play a subtle game in language, in order to honour the appropriate distinction and the relationship between God and the creature.

That subtlety is here in John’s affirmations and warnings about the love of the world. On the one hand, he is very ‘pro’ world. He insists – to the point of labelling the alternative view heresy (e.g., ‘antichrist’ in 2.18ff and 4.3) – that the divine Son took a very worldly human body, susceptible to worldly mortality on the cross. He goes further to insist that the divine Son – and so the very being of God – continues to be identified with that body. To speak about God is to have to refer to that body; the world ‘anchors’ God, and this is *good*.

On the other hand, it is the world in its opposition to such Godly worldliness which crucifies Jesus. God takes hold of the world in Jesus, and the world shrugs that hold off. The world embraced by God’s openness to it *breaks*, and breaks precisely *at the point of the embrace*. By crucifying Jesus we turn not only from God but from the world God turns *towards*. The crucifixion rejects God and rejects the good worldliness of God, manifest in Jesus.

This might seem all very complex but the complexity is in *us* – broken images of God that we are – and not in God. The gospel offers a turning from the brokenness of that image, from that world of human intercourse which chooses against God. This is the world which is passing away, the world which God has overcome by vindicating Jesus and his particular worldliness in the resurrection.

As we turn from the passing-away world, however, we turn not *only* towards God. This is because God is never ‘only’. God *is* anchored to the world: this is the God who loves the world, who has turned towards it, who even ‘cleaves’ to it (cf. Genesis 2.24). What God has joined – the world to Godself – we cannot separate. To turn towards God is to turn towards what God loves: the world.

So when John says, Do not love the world, he does not mean that the world does not matter, that we should concern ourselves only with ‘spiritual’ things. He does not mean that the *present* does not matter but only the promise heaven to come.

We are to turn from the world-in-itself to the world-in-God. This is only possible if we see that there is a way of being in the world *different* from that which is obvious: a different set of expectations, a different set of responsibilities. Such different expectations and responsibilities are the ground of the impossible demands of the gospel: Love your unlovely neighbour, Do not worry, Give away your precious things, Give up even your life. And they are the ground of the impossible gifts of the gospel: Hope, Peace, Joy.

The impossible things of the gospel are impossible in that world where ‘love’ is coloured by fear: a world which imagines that love only need reach to a concrete wall which divides peoples, that love only applies within a sovereign border, that it is only required within the limits of a commonness of creed or language or clique, or imagines that charity not only begins but also ends at home. The world loves by *dividing* up the world: us from them, here from there, now from then.

John’s ‘Do not love the world’ is better translated, ‘Do not love as the world loves’. Rather, love as God does, to reconcile what is separated: ‘In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins’ (cf. 4.10). God’s love gives an atoning, ‘*at-one-ing*’ sacrifice (‘atonement’ is literally as at-one-ment), which reconciles us to God and, *so*, to each other.

God’s love of the world we are is where love starts, and where it will finish. God loves us as we are, into what we shall become. Life – even ‘eternal’ life – is living within such love as this.

Let us then, love not as the world loves – to divide – but love to reconcile, with the ‘love of the Father’ (1.15), for this is how we are loved.
