

Pentecost 13  
19/8/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 5:1-12  
Psalm 34  
John 6:51-58

Conquering the world

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*In a sentence:  
Love conquers the world by  
winning it over*

We sometimes get the sense that theological specialists get a little het up from time to time on matters of precision and correctness in faith. I'm probably not immune to such a charge myself. Why bother with the language of the Creeds, with doctrinal precision, with correct liturgical structure?

As a way towards answering this, let's consider the theological intensity in the middle of our reading this morning from 1 John: '[*Jesus Christ*] is the one who came by water and blood...not with the water only but with the water and the blood.'

If nothing else, this is dense theology. It is neither immediately clear what it means nor why it matters. At the same time, John insists on it, rabidly, foaming at the mouth: this *really* does matter. There was obviously some controversy in John's community about 'the blood', and whether or not belief in 'the blood' had to be added to belief in the 'the water'. Perhaps the most likely scenario is something like this: there was an argument about whether or not the redeemer – the Son of God – was present in the baptism of Jesus *only* (the water, or the waters of birth [cf. John 3]), or whether he has *also* present in the *death* of Jesus (the blood).<sup>1</sup> What seems to be at stake is the relationship between 'Jesus' and 'the Son of God'.

That is, John defends here what we now call the doctrine of the Incarnation – the meeting of God and the world in the human being Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, if this makes sense of the statement, we must then wonder about the next thing: why does the Incarnation *matter*?

As far as John is concerned, the doctrine matters not for its own sake but for its crucial *pastoral* implication: it is those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God (that is, who believe Jesus came 'in the water and the blood') who 'conquer the world'.

'Conquering the world' is perhaps not the best way of putting it for modern ears anxious about histories of colonisation and so on, but we get the point if we invert John's way of putting it: it is those who believe in the meeting of Jesus and the Son – in the 'water and the blood' – who are not conquered *by* the world. 'The world' is here anything which might constitute a threat to us – the fears in our love, as we considered them last week. To believe that Jesus was the Son is to get a grip on the world, rather than be gripped by it.

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<sup>1</sup> This occurs elsewhere in John; cf. John 3, where a contrast is drawn between being born of 'water and the (s)pirit'. There is also the reference in John 19.34f: 'one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.)' That is it necessary to emphasise the truth of this indicates that the matter was very important in the understanding (and debates) in Johannine community.

This is so because the world ceases to be a place which comes *between* us and God – and so between us and our true selves; the world becomes the place where God is met and embraces us. In the person of Jesus God meets with the real world, as lived by a real person in time and space, with all its joys and sorrows.

We declare this each week in our recitation of the Creeds: Jesus is ‘God from God, light from light, true God from true God’... residing in, coinciding with, ‘was born...suffered...was buried.’ This is not mere doctrine; it is a way of saying that true God and true world can meet. The Creed declares that such a meeting has happened, and it is the hope of all who say the Creed that this will happen again.

And so the Jesus of the gospel is not a solitary individual, a tool in the hand of God, a means to some divine end. He is a real person engaged with other persons. His death is not mere mortality or tragedy, and it is – again (see July 29 sermon!) – not something God demands. The cross is a failure of the world to bear God – a rejection of such a presence of God to the world.

A sad philosopher once observed that ‘hell is other people’. It would have to be said that this was the experience of the crucified Jesus, because it was only by other people that he found himself on the cross; the physical suffering of the cross represented the suffering of the conflict endured throughout his ministry.

But the point of his ministry, and the point of John’s preaching through this dense and circular little letter, was to declare just the opposite: that heaven, also, is other people. This is why – as we saw last week – the love of whatever in the world it is appropriate to love can be the love of God – our love of God and God’s love of us. Our presence to God and God’s presence to us ‘looks like’ loving one another.

We do not believe ‘in the Incarnation’ as a thing which happened. The thing which happened, we believe, is the defining instance of God’s en-fleshing of himself in our very lives, and this matters for the continuing shape of our lives. To believe that Jesus was the divine Son is not so much to ‘conquer’ the world with right doctrine as it is to declare what the world truly is: a vessel – even ourselves – which God has created to fill with himself.

To believe that Jesus – even ‘in the blood’ of the cross – is ‘true God of true God’ in the world is to believe that there is nowhere in the world which is alien to God, nothing which cannot be raised from the dead.

This is why we are to love not only the lovely but also those who it seems even love would do little good. Such love always seems wasteful, always appears as a throwing of good after bad. But this is not to say that such love is then an expression of kindness or compassion. As a throwing of good after bad, *in the manner of God’s own work*, our love of the unlovely is an experiment in resurrection. Is there really a passion stronger than death, as Solomon puts it in the Song of Songs (Songs 8.6)? A ‘Yes’ to this question is what marks the Christian.

The world, then, in its constant turn towards deathly things, is not conquered for the sake of the conqueror – whether us or God. It is conquered for its own sake. For the weapon in this struggle is love, and love conquers as much for the beloved as for the lover. God, then, does not conquer the world so much as reach out to gather it to himself; for the closer the world is to God, the more it is what God intended it to be.

This is the promise of the gospel.

And we ‘prove’ the promise – in the double proving of testing and demonstrating – in the love we show to those in need of it.

Once again, then, let us love one another. For nothing else will help.

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