

Advent 3
16/12/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Isaiah 12:2-6
Luke 3: 7-18

What we wait for

‘Are you the one who is to come...?’

This question, at this part of the story, is very familiar to most of us – a familiarity like what we experience when we hear ‘What light through yonder window breaks...’ or ‘Frankly, my dear...’ or, more recently, ‘Ah’ll be bach’. These lines have a set place, and we wait for their beauty or poignancy or humour. So also the story of Jesus begins with the forerunner John and with the question – Are you the one who is to come?

Yet, while we know that the longing of the people is an integral part of the story of Jesus, their expectation is *not* ours and it cannot be. We are in a very different cultural place than they, not least because our culture is built on the assumption that the one to whom John refers has already come. Whatever we could expect now must be quite different from what John’s congregations expected because we are at a different stage of the story.

But apart from our being at that different stage, there is another sense in which we are different in terms of what we could possibly expect. In particular, and despite our Christian heritage (some would say, *because* of it), ours is an increasingly ‘pagan’ experience of the world. That is, our worldview has become an *enclosed* one. While we recognise that things change with time – that new(-ish) things appear – this experience is informed by our sense that change in the world is *evolutionary*. Internal conditions of environment and need work together to reshape and – if we are lucky – to improve us. Life in the world, then, is helical in character – like a corkscrew through time; if we are lucky, we are always moving ‘up’ the helix. It is in this way that we are ‘pagan’ – everything which could happen is understood to be internal to the system and, in this sense, has already happened. The only *ultimate* end we can imagine today is the deep entropic cold which comes from the unwinding of a wound-up universe, of which our own more imminent deaths are the sacrament: whatever lesser ends we might reach for in the interim, the true end is not Goal or Purpose; it is Cessation, Nothingness.

This is very different from the outlook of John and his congregation, who saw history as moving to a climax, a determining moment. With the imminent arrival of ‘the one who is to come’, history comes to its end – its ultimate goal – however that end might be visualised (the book of Revelation being one such visualisation!).

Now the question is, Did they have it better than we? There *was* a messianic expectation into which John preached and out of which Jesus was interpreted, but is it *necessary* for the story? Is the expectation of *that type* of temporal ending necessary to hearing and believing the gospel?

This matters because we cannot re-enter into their anticipation, as much this or that religious sect manages to delude itself in this way for a while. We cannot hope again in this way, because that kind of hope is culturally excluded. They asked, ‘When will the world end?’; we ask, ‘What will make the world bearable?’

Yet these two questions are less different than they might first appear.

The earnest longing for the *end* of the world in John's time and our earnest desire that the endless world be *bearable* meet in the scriptural testimony that the world is not God. Our goal, our purpose, our end is that we be *creatures*, and not God (mindful that the Genesis myth sees the primal human failure as the desire to be like God [Genesis 3]).

The confusion of God and the world – and our sense that this is wrong – is what makes John's ethical teaching as striking and appealing now as it was then, despite our very different thoughts about the nature of history. The extra tunic given to one who has none declares that poverty is not a god to be respected; poverty is not 'proper' world. When the powerful act not *against* the weak but *for* them, they declare that power is not a god to be honoured. Generosity declares that greed is not a god to which we sacrifice the needy. There must necessarily be an economy but it is not a god, despite the sacrifices we make to it. There must necessarily be clans, tribes and nations but they are not gods, despite the sacrifices we make for them. Our children are not gods...and on it goes.

Everything we touch in the world, and everything which happens between us when touch each other, has for us the potential in that contact to be rendered either divine or mundane. When it comes to the things of the world, *only* the mundane is good, despite how miserable the word 'mundane' is for us these days. The world and everything in it is, properly, *only* world, 'merely' secular.

What ails the human heart in every time and place is its tendency to worship or fear some worldly thing as if it were divine: our money, our relationships, our kings, our power, our ambitions, our death. If we cannot any more expect that the world will end in the coming of a messiah, it is not because we are less naïve or more scientific, or even because the Messiah is said already to have come. It is because we feel that what is wrong with the world is too much a *part* of us to be properly treated. A thousand qualifications might deal with the inconvenience of a single God, but they are not enough to free us from fearing and worshipping the *multitude* of worldly things we turn into divine things. This is the Christian theological meaning of the every new book of regulations which issues from a Royal Commission or church enquiry: the gods being more tightly bound, morality merely evolving.

This dismal assessment is the same as that of John's desert congregations: we cannot liberate ourselves. And John's response to them is what we need also to hear now: it is only when God comes that the world finds its true end, its goal and purpose. This is why Christian worship properly begins with the prayer, *Come, Lord*. Again, it is only when God comes that the world finds its true end, its goal, its purpose. For God comes not to sweep away but to uncover – this is what you really are, this is how it all fits together: in me.

This is both a painful revelation and a creative one.

John declares, 'The one who is coming baptises with fire'. Fire purifies by burning away all that is not solid and elemental, and there is much about us which must go in this way.

And John declares, 'The one who is coming baptises with the Holy Spirit'. It is the Holy Spirit which puts things in their right relation to each other, which makes God God and us the creatures we are created to be.

What makes the world bearable is when we hear that all which can happen is not a mere – and often terrifying – extension of what has already happened, and that our even increasingly sophisticated methods of restraining the gods will not bring our liberation.

What we await is the clear declaration, and the initial signs, that there comes the fiery gift of God's Spirit, which testifies to and makes real the Word which is the way, truth and the life for which God created us.

We wait in the words of the prayer, *Come, Lord* – the prayer of the church in every time – and we wait in actions which contradict the pantheon of powers which keep us in thrall and by which we keep others in thrall.

Let us, then, commit ourselves again to that prayer and to such works of love, that the glory of the coming of the Lord might be something to which all eyes are lifted.

Amen.
