

Ash Wednesday
6/3/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18
Luke 6:27-38

Better a living dog than a dead lion

*In a sentence:
To be seen by God is its own reward*

This evening, we have heard two accounts of *how to be* which seem to be quite unrelated. Yet, at the very least, what they do have in common is that each draws a contrast between two options and commends the one over the other.

From Qohelet (Ecclesiastes), we hear of the priority of the living over the dead: better a living dog than a dead lion. For him death holds no promise beyond the shadowy existence of Sheol and, although living is comprised by ‘vanity’ – by the ungraspability of being – it *is* living, and we are to make the most of it.

From Jesus we hear something which seems a whole world away: how to ‘practice piety’. Paramount here is the question of who ‘sees’: do we pray or give to be seen by those around us, or to be seen by God?

Before going too much further it will help to recall how we are reading Ecclesiastes in these Lenten reflections. We are holding two things in a creative tension – what we hear from Ecclesiastes and what we hear in the gospels. In this we allow that what one or the other might seem to mean by itself may come to mean something quite different when impacted upon the other. The tension *is* creative – out of it comes something that was not there before (or, at least, not seen before).

When Qohelet contrasts death and life, there is no tension, and there is none in the contrast which Jesus draws between those who see us. But if we allow that both Qohelet and Jesus are speaking about the same kind of thing – how to be in this life ‘under the sun’ – and with the same kind of scriptural authority, then what each commends needs to be considered in relation to the other.

This means that Qohelet’s couplet of ‘life’ and ‘death’ correspond to Jesus’ couplet ‘being seen by God’ and ‘being seen by other worshippers’.

To match these things up, then, Qohelet’s ‘to be joined with the living’ corresponds to Jesus’ ‘being seen by God’: *to be seen by God is to be joined with the living*.

When we come then to think about the ‘creative tension’ which stands between these ways of understanding how to be, being alive and being dead are not only about whether my heart is still beating. While Qohelet doesn’t hold to anything which looks like a Christian account of a joyful afterlife, he can use biological death as a way of characterising the half-life he has lived to this point, and the half-life which most of us live most of the time. I have done it all, he says, and it is just a chasing of the wind. Not to recognise the vanity of our efforts to overcome the human condition is to be dead, to have ash in our hair rather than oil, sackcloth rather than white robes. His question is, Why die before you are dead?

And it is the same with Jesus. To be seen only by those around us, those who intentionally or unintentionally confirm our own chasing after the wind, is its own reward. It is as much as we will receive and is not yet to be seen by God. This is its own kind of living death.

To consider our context tonight, we will hear in a little while, ‘You are dust, and to dust you will return’. What does that *mean*?

We are not to *lament* that we are dust, only to *remember* it. If Lent is a season of repentance, or (literally) ‘re-thinking’, then it is a season not of lamenting that we are dust – which we do often enough – but a season of learning again what happens when *God looks upon dust*.

Jesus contrasts not what we see and know but who sees and knows us. Merely to be seen through the eyes of those around us is its own reward – ashes upon ashes, dust upon dust. (We are ash *to* ash and dust *to* dust, but we are not to build with ash or dust; it is just this which Qohelet seeks to name as pointless.)

And to be seen by the eyes of God is its own reward. For the gaze of God raises the dead, enlivens even the dust.

Lent is a season of Easter, a *life-giving* season. As we observe Jesus on the path to the cross, we are seeing God looking at one of us and, in that, knowing us and persevering with us. The path to the cross is dust made lively under the gaze of God.

To speak of resurrection, which we will come to do, is to say that God *still* sees Jesus, even on the cross, and this gaze continues to be life-giving. Because the heart of our faith is that Jesus is joined to us, so too then will we be raised.

Qohelet himself will finally affirm that we are dust (12.7). But affirms also what God gives to us: approval and time.

Remember that you are dust, and rejoice that that is enough for God to work with.
