

Pentecost 19
20/10/2019

Mark the Evangelist

1 Timothy 6:6-12

Psalm 40

Luke 18:1-8

Fight the good fight

In a sentence:

The good fight of faith is the struggle to let God be God

Most of us are fully aware that we are going to die. With that comes for many also the awareness – even the fear – that much of what we have done in our lives might well be mucked up by those who come after us.

This concern, of course, doesn't need our impending death to be active for us. It might only be that we vacate a position in which we think we have done well done and then see that much of that achievement squandered or thrown away by our successor. We have fought a good fight, and then someone else seems to throw in the towel.

It takes great humility to be freed from fear of such loss, or from judgement of those who follow us. Or, to put it differently, it takes great humility to die: to have done what we had to do and then move on, without looking back, perhaps without any 'true' successor.

This dynamic of perceived loss is sometimes read into the letters to Timothy and Titus: the writer seems to weaken the penetrating and dynamic work of Paul, in whose name he writes. Paul is captivated by the justifying righteousness of God while the writer of Timothy seems principally concerned with the righteousness we ourselves must achieve.

We have already touched on the theme of 'pseudonymity' – the theory that Paul did not write these letters but another wrote them in his name. We won't spend much time on why this theory is strongly held by many biblical scholars (check a commentary!) but, assuming the theory to be correct, *why* might someone engage in such an 'impious' act as forging letters like this. Why does 'the Pastor' (to borrow a name some have given our unknown author) write in Paul's name?

The simple answer is the *authority* that name carries, and the Pastor plays heavily on Paul's authority in the letter. But this is not yet enough. What is the *need* to add to what the real Paul had already said? The answer here is that Paul is no longer available, while the church has continued and now has new issues which require an authoritative word.

Paul wrote when the Christian movement was small and its organisation was strongly 'charismatic'. Apostles could relate directly to the few scattered communities.

For the Pastor, it is quite different. If Christ has not come as we expected, what then are we to do? The answer is a kind of 'settling' of the church into an ongoing life in the world. And so the church takes on a clearer institutional order, apparently now authorised by one of those great charismatic leaders. Authority shifted from the conviction and encouragement and correction of recognised apostles to authority reflected in structure.

And so the Pastor is interested in bishops, deacons, elders and even a kind of order called 'widows'. Orientation to the imminent coming of Jesus shifts to living lives which reflect that Jesus is Lord, irrespective of whether he might come again. Paul expects the arrival of God to vindicate Christian conviction and practice. The Pastor expects piety and peacefulness to speak for themselves.

Which of these responses to the times – Paul or the Pastor – is the 'truer'? Were we to ask Paul, we might find that he would read these letters in his name with disdain, or even horror. There is not much wrong with what is *in* the letters, but there is much missing which mattered greatly to him. And yet the letters remain – *for us* – Scripture.

We noted in our first reflection that, ultimately, all Scripture comes to us under a pseudonym – *necessarily* separated from the real people who wrote it and who feature in it. We can have no confidence that we read it with a historical correctness, in the sense that we understand what the writer might have intended. This is, in part, because we are in a different time and place. Paul may not hear himself in our reading of him. In this way, *we* change the author as we read.

But, perhaps more importantly, all Scripture is pseudonymous because we cannot be confident that the authors themselves quite knew what they were doing. Certainly they did not imagine that they were writing *Scripture*. This categorisation comes later, when the church hears something in the material which makes Jesus present again. We speak of 'Paul' for convenience's sake but, for the sake of faithfulness to the gospel, it is 'Scripture' and not 'Paul' which addresses us. On the breath which is the Spirit, Scripture speaks a word which *has* a history in such a personage as Paul but the true orientation of which is toward *making* history. When the Pastor claims Paul's authority he does what we all must finally do: he 'becomes' Paul, becomes scriptural authority in a new situation, even if Paul would no longer recognise himself.

To preach the word, whether in words – as from a lectern – or in actions, is to say or do what matters now. It is possible that we do this badly, but even this is difficult to recognise. Hindsight only guesses at what might have been better. We know that every moment is different although we never really know properly *how* it is different. In every moment we must speak and act, seeing only as in a glass, darkly.

This would be to almost reason to give up the game altogether, for what is righteousness if we cannot *know* that it is righteousness? What could keep us in the game is the true miracle at the heart of the gospel. This is the cross – which was so central for Paul, if almost totally absent from the Pastor's writings.

The cross is the sign that, even though every 'now' is different from every other 'now', the God who alone is present to *every* 'now' is present to claim it as his own. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing – and whatever *others* are doing – God claims our and their 'now' for God's own live-giving purposes.

The life of Jesus himself is the life to which the Pastor calls us: the good fight of faith in righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness as the Pastor describes it (6.11). Faith holds that God was present to this life in Jesus. At the same time, the cross is the *denigration* of Jesus' life and ministry. In the light of the resurrection, faith holds God present *also* to the crucified Jesus. Judged by us to be righteous or unrighteous, Jesus remains God's.

Jesus becomes, then, two things at once: the 'good life' of one who is truly righteous, godly, faithful, loving, steadfast and gentle and, at the same time, he is the crucified and so at as great a distance from God as one can be.

What bridges that contradiction is nothing in Jesus himself but only the desire of God that Jesus be God's in whatever situation he be found.

The Pastor's call to the good fight of faith is not merely call that we be righteous and piety and steadfast and kind in a simple moral sense. Such things are too relative to the times in which we happen to live, and change with cultural seasons.

The good fight of faith is the struggle to allow God to be the one who is righteous and who justifies, the one who is kind and makes gentle, who endures and causes in us steadfastness. The good fight of faith is the struggle to allow God to be our only true successor – the one who follows and proves and justifies.

To let God be the God who made and *still* makes us is to die the death of the humble, and so to be raised to the life of the humble in righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.

Let this life be yours.
