

Naming of Jesus
29/12/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Numbers 6:22-27

Psalm 8

Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 2:15-21

Boxing Day Buns

In a sentence

God does not notice our seasons – even our godless times – except to the extent that God can use them to claim all our times as God's own

Rumour has it that, the day after Christmas, you could buy 'Boxing Day buns' at Coles supermarket: hot cross buns with a Christmas re-labelling. (Woolworths will apparently follow next week, and Aldi the week after). And the cry has gone up that the supermarket is 'changing tradition'. As with roses so also with buns – a hot cross bun is a hot cross bun by any other name, and hot cross buns are only for Easter time.

There probably is something to lament here, as there is something to lament in the way in which Christmas has changed culturally under the pressures of capitalism. But these cultural pressures are less interesting than what is implicit in the *complaints* about the changes they bring. What is implicit in the complaint about Boxing Day buns is that we should not eat them until the 'right' season, as if the time of year tells us what hot cross buns themselves 'tell' us.

To consider this more deeply, let's put to one side the question of when *we* should eat them and ask a less obvious but more important question: when does *God* eat hot cross buns?

We'll ignore the obvious problem with that question simply because it is more interesting to do so. Does God only eat hot cross buns in Holy Week? And when does God *stop* eating hot cross buns? (As it happens, no one seems to be too interested with the question of when *we* should stop eating them, although if there is a time we should start eating them then presumably someone should also get worked up about how long the buns remain in stores after Easter, as well!)

It might not surprise you that these questions are not typically covered in the average course in theology for ministers in training – which is lamentable – but we'll do our best with them this morning, and this brings us to our reading from St Paul.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

There is a *lot* going on in this text but what matters here for God's interest in hot cross buns is right in the middle of the text, and scholars find that it appears as an interruption to the flow of what was probably an early Christian hymn, quoted here by Paul. The words 'even death on a cross' break the rhythm and balance of the text, suggesting that Paul has inserted them here. In this way he draws attention to the meaning of Jesus' death, as determined by his crucifixion.

Paul, then, is not giving an account merely of what happened – that Jesus was crucified – as if he might have died some other way. '[*Even*]¹ death on a cross' shifts the crucifixion from what might have been *seen* to what was *actually happening*. What could be seen was a man on a cross, among other men on crosses, and indistinguishable from them in that. But because of who he is, the crucifixion becomes part of him in a wholly (and holy) unexpected way.

And so the crucifixion becomes part of *God* in an unexpected way. Paul claims for Jesus that he was 'in the form of God' – that he bore God's image, we might otherwise say. The important thing is, however, that even death on a cross – even a *Godforsaken* death – does not change that status as 'image', even if the image is now cross-ed.

The silly question about when God eats hot cross buns is actually about God's relationship to the cross: when is God 'interested' in Good Friday?

God's image bears the cross; so also, then, must *God* be marked by the cross, if the image reflects its source truly. And this is the heart of the matter: that *God's* heart is cross-shaped.

This we are easily able to forget, given as we are to festive seasons, to there being a time for everything and everything in its time. Yet the seasons – *as* seasons – are distractions. They are the chapters which, though they seem to divide up a story, are only there because of the particular story which is being told. A good editor chops everything, no matter how interesting, which does not contribute to the whole which is the story itself, which is not there *only* because of what it contributes to the whole.

But this is very hard to sustain. Divided up into seasons as the story of God has become, each season now provides us with an opportunity to get God wrong in a particular way, and so also to get ourselves wrong. We see a cradle without a cross, a cross without a resurrection, a sceptre without a scourge, a Spirit without a crucifixion, or a teacher without a saviour, so that the story is now sentimentalised, now mere tragedy, now triumphalist, now 'religious', now moral.

¹ The 'even' is not in the Greek but inserted into some translations to draw attention to the disruption of 'death on a cross'.

The problem, then, is not that hot cross buns come too early or too late. It is that we can imagine that the cross is only a seasonal matter, that Christmas and Easter mark different things, are different lessons in a curriculum.

Against this, we should not ask ‘when’ God eats hot cross buns because God eats *only* hot cross buns – only the cross. ‘Jesus is Lord’ means ‘the crucified one is Lord’. And this is ‘to the glory of God the Father’ because God’s glory is that even the godforsaken are God’s own, and not lost forever.

It is, of course, unlikely that the product line manager at Coles has been reflecting on all this and has determined that, for the spiritual health of the nation, we ought to have free access to hot cross buns all year – a kind of daily self-administered Eucharist.

It’s unlikely, and it doesn’t matter. Our getting the times wrong is about getting God wrong, in a way peculiar to whatever time it is, and supermarket shelves are scarcely the worst of it.

But to name Jesus as Lord – to see the cross at God’s heart – is to say that God is untimely, and to set Boxing Day buns in a new light. To confine the work of God to a season is to get God, and ourselves, wrong.

Let us, then, not be distracted by the approach of a ‘new year,’ or the arrival of Easter too early. Time is not our lord.

But there is a *Lord of time* whose untimeliness is God’s freedom. If Jesus is Lord of time – the image of God in whose image we are made – then Jesus himself is the time of our lives, and we are lords of time with him.

Let us then, fear nothing – least of all Boxing Day buns – for our times are in God’s hands and only when we are so held are we free.
